https://bahaicatholic.wordpress.com

The document discusses the Baha'i Faith, its beliefs, and critiques of interfaith dialogue and the relationship between religion and societal progress.

A Clash of Histories

This part critiques the Baha’i perspective on the relationship between religion and the evolution of civilization. The author questions the Baha’i claim that Manifestations of God have significantly influenced social complexity. It argues that major historical changes, like the Neolithic and Industrial Revolutions, occurred independently of religious influence. The author seeks informed answers on how Baha’i teachings align with historical evidence.

A Critique of “Letter to the World’s Religious Leaders”

This section critiques the Baha’i document aimed at promoting unity among religions. The author argues that the claim of a recent awareness of a single human race is historically inaccurate. It emphasizes that the concept of humanity as a single race has been present in Christianity for centuries. The critique suggests that Baha’is may overlook the historical awareness of religious diversity prior to their teachings.

A “Very Ironic” Defense of the Pope

This section discusses a defense of Pope Benedict XVI in light of a controversy at La Sapienza University. The author agrees with the defense of freedom of expression and critiques the hypocrisy of those opposing the Church. It highlights the Pope's stance on the relationship between reason and revelation. The author contrasts Catholic practices regarding theological dissent with Baha'i practices, questioning the double standards in perceived censorship.

Abortion and the Faith

This section raises questions about the Baha'i stance on abortion in relation to human rights. The author notes a lack of discussion on abortion within the Baha'i community despite teachings on the sanctity of life. It prompts Baha'is to reflect on their views and community discussions regarding abortion.

Baha'i Superiority

This section critiques the perceived superiority of the Baha'i Faith over other religions. The author highlights statements from Baha'i teachings that suggest other religions are outdated or flawed. It questions the Baha'i claim of universal truths while implying that other faiths lack similar principles. The author provides a fictional interview with Abdu'l-Baha to illustrate the Baha'i perspective on Christian doctrines, emphasizing a dismissive attitude towards traditional beliefs.

Discrepancies in Beliefs About Christ

The text discusses the differences between Baha'i and Christian beliefs regarding Jesus Christ. Baha'is express admiration for Christ but do not

share core Christian beliefs about his divinity and resurrection. Christians view belief in Christ as encompassing specific doctrines, including the Trinity and the resurrection. Miscommunication arises when Baha'is claim to "believe in" Christ without clarifying their differing interpretations.

Interfaith Understanding and Misunderstandings

The text highlights the challenges in interfaith dialogue, particularly between Baha'is and Muslims. An interfaith football match was canceled due to differing views on gender participation, illustrating cultural misunderstandings. Baha'is and Muslims share values regarding modesty but apply them differently based on their respective teachings. The author criticizes a Baha'i perspective that dismisses Muslim traditions as outdated without understanding their significance.

Comparison of Baha’i Fast and Lent

The text compares the Baha’i Fast and the Christian season of Lent. Both practices aim to deepen spiritual focus through abstinence, but they differ in duration and observance. The Baha’i Fast lasts for 19 days, with fasting only during daylight hours, while Lent lasts for 40 days with continuous abstinence. Both traditions encourage remembrance of God through the act of fasting, though they are not directly related.

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A PROTESTANT VIDEO ON CATHOLICISM

The following is a video produced by a Lutheran denomination giving a basic introduction to the Catholic Church.

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A CLASH OF HISTORIES

In paragraph 23 of the *Letter to the World's Religious Leaders*, the Universal House of Justice says,

> From its [religion's] counsels the rational soul has derived encouragement in overcoming limits imposed by the world and in fulfilling itself.

I'm not sure what exactly this sentence is talking about. I mean, I agree with it, but when I think about it, it could mean almost anything. Not only that, but the wording could just as easily apply to things besides religion. Try it. Replace the word *religion* with something else, like *science* for example, or *poetry*. The sentence is just as meaningful.

Baha'is are trying to overcome the barriers that divide the human race. For that, I applaud them. But there is a grave problem in how they're going about it. There is a built-in contradiction in the Baha'i Faith.

On the one hand, Baha'is insist there is a common ground uniting all religions, and they believe that by emphasizing this common ground, they can help to overcome religious divisions. The problem is that reducing religion to a lowest common denominator just empties it of any real meaning. It becomes nothing more than vapid platitudes.

But then on the other hand, the Baha'i Faith is a whole belief system unto itself, different from any other (although bearing a striking resemblance to Islam). It has beliefs that are uncompromising, like

the oneness of God, or that the human being is fundamentally a spirit, or that the afterlife involves progressing through the worlds of God. People came to Baha'u'llah and Abdu'l-Baha and asked them specific questions, and got specific answers.

It sometimes happens that people join the Faith thinking it allows them to do and believe anything they want. Then they suddenly find out they're not supposed to believe in reincarnation anymore, or they can't drink beer, or they can't worship Ganesh, or any of a hundred thousand other things that followers of other religions do or believe. So religion isn't just the vapid cloud portrayed in some Baha'i teaching material (like this Letter). Religion, true religion, is the Baha'i Faith, and everything else is a pale copy of that.

The Universal House of Justice goes on to say,

> As the name implies, religion has simultaneously been the chief force binding diverse peoples together in ever larger and more complex societies through which the individual capacities thus released can find expression.

When I was a Baha'i, there were two timelines of world history in my head. One was the timeline of Manifestations, each revealing a succeeding chapter in God's eternally unfolding religion. The other was the gradual rise of civilization through successively more complex stages: family, tribe, city-state, nation-state, and culiminating in world unity.

What was never explained to me was how these two timelines fit together. Which Manifestation caused which advancement in civilizational complexity? Granted not every Manifestation has to

have brought one about, but clearly some of them had to. Can anyone give me an answer? I mean an informed answer, involving reference to specific historical or archaeological evidence.

There have been two significant changes in social complexity in human history. One was the Neolithic "Revolution", when agriculture was adopted in the late Stone Age. I use inverted commas because it was a centuries-long process, but it was revolutionizing all the same. The second one was the Industrial Revolution, a much more rapid event. Between these two events lots of things happened. Millions of people were born and died, empires rose and fell, cities were built and fell into ruin – but there was no significant change in the overall complexity of human life. And it was during that period that all the Manifestations of God listed in your Baha'i pamphlet lived, except for the Bab and Baha'u'llah.

In other words, the idea that the Manifestations of God motivated this process – from family to tribe to city-state to nation – is a fiction. These stages all pre-date the earliest Manifestations on the Baha'is' list. The transition from family to tribe happened many tens of thousands of years ago. Towns start to appear during the Neolithic period. State societies first formed in the Middle East in the third millenium BC, and in India, China and Greece in the following millenium.

On the other hand, the nation-state as we know it today – that is, a state society based on the national or ethnic identity of its members – is comparatively recent. It emerged in the nineteenth century. That conveniently coincides with the Twin Manifestations of the Baha'i Era – the only time the two timelines coincide in real life.

Er… that is, it would be convenient, except they weren't supposed to usher in the nation-state.

Now let's remember that the UHJ is telling the leaders of the other religions that they need to put aside their differences and unite on what they have in common. Presenting this vision of world history does not help their case. How can they hope to persuade non-Baha'is if the evidence they present cannot be verified through historical evidence, and can only be believed if you have the faith of a Baha'i.

Finishing the paragraph,

> The great advantage of the present age is the perspective that makes it possible for the entire human race to see this civilizing process as a single phenomenon, the ever-recurring encounters of our world with the world of God.

No, the present age doesn't give us this perspective. The Baha'i Central Figures do.

There's nothing special about the modern age in making such a perspective possible. People have always travelled around and met foreigners with strange customs. To hear Baha'is talk you'd think everyone before 1844 lived under a rock. And suddenly everyone became aware that there are other religions besides their own. Jews awoke one day to learn there's such a thing as Muslims. Buddhists were surprised to find that the world was not entirely composed of Buddhists.

This notion would be patronizing if it weren't so naive. There's nothing new about the Baha'i perspective on religions. People have

always been aware that there were religions other than their own. And the mental strategies for dealing with this diversity have always been the same. You either regard all religions as essentially talking about the same thing, or you see your religion as true and all others as false, or you fall somewhere in between.

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A CRITIQUE OF "LETTER TO THE WORLD'S RELIGIOUS LEADERS"

In a short series of posts over the coming weeks I will, God willing, discuss some points made in the document "Letter to the World's Religious Leaders," published by the Universal House of Justice in 2002. I believe this letter illustrates some of the flaws in the Baha'i worldview that will prevent the Baha'is from achieving their goal of world peace and universal brotherhood. That's not to say these are not worthy goals – they are. They're wonderful goals. But the way the Baha'is are going about it is all wrong, and results – inadvertently – in promoting prejudice against the existing religions.

Let's begin with the first sentence, which shows as much a false sense of history as a false understanding of the religions Baha'is pretend to unite:

> The enduring legacy of the twentieth century is that it compelled the peoples of the world to begin seeing themselves as the members of a single human race, and the earth as that race's common homeland.

It should go without saying that the awareness of a single human race has been with us much longer than 100 years. In Christianity, both Scripture and Tradition simply take it for granted that all men were created by the one God and are a single people.

In the Bible, God creates Adam and Eve and they become the progenitors of the human race. The scope of the story later narrows

to focus on the Covenant between God and Abraham, which extends through his later generations as they become the People of Israel. Yet even though the main story of the Hebrew Bible is the relationship between God and the Israelites, there are times when the vision of the text widens and you see all of humanity included in God's plan. You see this, for example, in the Prophets who reveal oracles meant for the gentile nations. The book of Jonah is the story of a prophet called to preach, not just to a non-Israelite people, but to an ancient enemy of the Israelites.

In the New Testament this inclusion of all the peoples of the world becomes complete, and the Apostles and their successors scatter to all parts of the world to preach, to bring all nations, kindreds, tongues and peoples into the Church. Consider the stories that have passed down to us about the lives and martyrdoms of the Apostles. Peter and Paul go to Rome, Jude to Armenia, Thomas to India, Matthew to either Ethiopia or Parthia, etc. Some of these stories are reliable; some are legendary. The point though is that early Christians recognized that the Gospel was for all people, and all people constitute a single race called to a relationship of love with God. As Paul says in the Letter to the Galatians,

> There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus.

But to hear Baha'is talk you'd think this is a novel concept. They're certainly aware of these teachings in other religions. In fact they'll point them out as evidence of their common root. But they sometimes give the impression that the followers of those religions

hadn't been aware of this before, and it took the Baha'is to make them aware of it.

This post is part of a series on the Letter to the World's Religious Leaders

1. A critique of "Letter to the World's Religious Leaders"
2. The purpose of religion?
3. Religious prejudice in the "Letter to the World's Religious Leaders
4. When inclusiveness is exclusive
5. Teaching Christians about Christianity
6. Resurrection pie
7. The "insuperable wall" between Heaven and Earth
8. A clash of histories
9. The true purpose of interfaith panels

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A “VERY IRONIC” DEFENSE OF THE POPE

Marco Oliveira, author of the popular Baha’i blog Povo de Baha, has posted some comments on Youtube regarding the recent flap at La Sapienza University. Here is Mr. Oliveira:

☐ Video: Click to watch

I agree with the spirit of his comments. Freedom of expression is a good and should be protected, and what the small group of radical students and professors at La Sapienza sought to accomplish was censorship and, as Mr. Oliveira put it, “an attack against freedom of expression”.

He offered two observations on the episode. The second one is very well put: “Fanaticism and radicalism do not only exist within religions. They exist also amongst those who think that religion is the source of all evil.” Consider how strange this is: opponents of Church teaching seek to silence Christians and prevent us from practicing our religion, all in the name of tolerance. Strangest of all, they seem to be entirely unaware of their own hypocrisy.

The speech the Pope had planned to make is available here in English translation. (Here is the original Italian, and here is the Portuguese translation.) In this speech the Pope states that reason and revelation go together, that you cannot have one without the other.

By the way, that has always been the position of the Catholic

Church, and theologians throughout our history have expressed the Christian truth by means of human philosophy, such as Platonism and Aristotelianism. Recent theologians have used recent philosophies. For example, John Paul II expounded his Theology of the Body (a theological explanation of Christian sexuality) through the philosophical language of Phenomenology.

Many Christian groups accuse the Catholic Church of having corrupted the purity of the Gospel with human philosophies. They have a very narrow understanding of truth. Catholics believe that truth can be found throughout the world and in all human societies. Naturally human philosophies contain some error along with the truth, but it does not corrupt the Gospel to express Christianity in terms of a given philosophy or cultural paradigm. The truth of Christ remains, and all Christian theologians, philosophers, pastors and laymen, whether they lived in Ancient Rome, medieval Ethiopia or modern Peru, are all part of the same Catholic tradition because they all express the same truth.

This brings me to where I disagree with Mr. Oliveira. He claims that Benedict XVI is a member of a “conservative faction” in the Church. He further states that it is ironic for the Pope to be portrayed as a victim of censorship since he and his faction enforce censorship on others, giving as examples Hans Kung and Leonardo Boff.

Here Mr. Oliveira is applying a double standard. Given that he is a Baha’i in good standing and loyal to the Baha’i Covenant, he must have some appreciation for such Baha’i practices as literature review, administrative sanction and declaration of covenant breaking. Literature review ensures that literature written by

Baha'is conforms to the teachings of the Faith. Critics of the Faith (notably the ex-Baha'is mentioned in Dr. Momen's recent article) frequently claim that this practice amounts to censorship. Yet what the Church did with Hans Kung was milder even than literature review.

In literature review, all Baha'is without exception must get approval for any book or article they publish on the Faith. I'm not saying this is a bad policy; I have no problem with it. I point it out only for the sake of comparison. In Catholicism, there is no such literature review. If you are licensed as a Church theologian, though, it is expected that what you say about Catholic beliefs conform to Church teaching.

Hans Kung had such a license, meaning the Church endorsed him as qualified to explain Catholic doctrine. When he insisted on publishing ideas contrary to Catholic doctrine, the Church (more specifically Cardinal Ratzinger) revoked his license. He was not excommunicated, and he is still a priest in good standing.

If Mr. Oliveira regards this as censorship, then does he regard literature review as censorship? Will he speak as disparagingly of the disenrollment of Sen McGlinn, a harsher punishment than Hans Kung received?

The same goes for Leonardo Boff. In fact, these two theologians have some basic ideas in common. They both question the legitimacy of the Church's hierarchy. They both question the divinity of Christ. They both question the effectiveness of the sacraments. But without these things, there is no Catholicism.

Imagine a comparable theologian in the Baha'i community – he questions the legitimacy of the Universal House of Justice, he questions whether Baha'u'llah really was a Manifestation. If he's like Boff, he might promote worship of Bahiyyih Khanum as a goddess, or he might promote an alternate meeting in place of the Nineteen Day Feast, where the poor Baha'is can talk about the value of armed revolution to overthrow their wealthy oppressors, including members of the Baha'i administration.

Baha'is would naturally be horrified to see a Baha'i theologian expounding such views. But when a Catholic theologian does it, he's just contributing to Christian diversity and to sanction him is censorship. Can someone explain this to me?

This double standard becomes even more stark when we consider Hans Kung. Kung's approach to his faith is very much like that of the Baha'i dissidents discussed in Dr. Momen's recent article. Do Baha'is think that it's okay for the Baha'i administration to sanction dissidents, but it's not okay for the Catholic Church to do so?

In short, would Mr. Oliveira characterize the members of the Universal House of Justice and the International Teaching Centre as a "conservative faction" within the Baha'i community?

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ABORTION AND THE FAITH

The Baha'i Writings say that human life begins at conception. During my eight years as a Baha'i, though, I never heard anyone express concern over the practice of abortion.

In retrospect, that seems strange. Baha'is make a big deal about some aspects of human rights, like racism and sexism. But if a person begins life at conception, then isn't abortion a human rights issue too? Why doesn't it get the same attention that race unity does?

I'd like to hear what Baha'is have to say about this. What has been your experience in the Faith with regard to abortion? How do the members of your local community feel about it? Do they ever discuss it? Has abortion come up in firesides or in institute? How was it handled?

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ANGELS AND DEMONS

(This post is about actual angels and demons, not about the recent film.)

I just found an old comment from five months ago that I hadn't responded to. My apologies to Martijn Rep for missing his comment. Mr. Rep asked a question in the thread under From Hindu to Baha'i to Christian:

> I learned that at least for some Christians the devil, or various demons, play an important role in this world as real creatures, not just as the individual ego or insistent self. ...

This is in fact a doctrine held by most Christians. We believe that there are two types of rational creature: angels and humans. Both have free will and face the choice of turning either toward God or away. The demons are those angels who turned away. Just as angels are real persons, so are demons.

Some Christians make a mistake, though, in the degree to which demons (and angels) play a role in their daily lives. For them, every good thing that happens is due to an angel's or saint's influence, and every bad thing is evidence of demonic attack. The Church discourages this superstitious mindset.

Most of the time, when a person thinks a bad thought or does a bad thing, they are acting on their own initiative. We already have an inclination to sin, after all. It can happen, though, that a demon will put an idea into someone's head. But that's all a demon can do. He can't make someone do something they don't want to do. When you

get right down to it, it's your own self that makes you sin.

(Incidentally, the Christian view of angels and demons is different from the Muslim view. In Islam, there are three types of rational creature: angels, humans and jinn. Angels have no free will so they can't turn away from God. Demons are evil jinn rather than fallen angels.)

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ANY THOUGHTS ON THE BLOG DESIGN?

I'm experimenting with some changes to the blog's look. I wanted to keep the old look but with three columns instead of two (kind of like what Barney Leith switched to a short time ago), but WordPress.com doesn't provide that option. So I'm trying this one out. Any thoughts, feelings, concerns? Do you prefer the old look or the new, or are you indifferent?

As one might expect, I believe in the divine right of bloggers. I'll just do what I want anyway, but don't let that stop you from speaking up. We live in a democracy, after all.

The sidebars et cetera will be in a state of disarray for a few days, but posting and commenting will continue as normal.

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ARMED

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I like Devon Gundry's song and video very much. I love Mr. Gundry's voice, and Justin Baldoni's directing and all the actors are fantastic. I agree with all the Baha'is out there who have heaped praise on the video. The first time I watched it, though, something seemed off, and I couldn't put my finger on it. I've been thinking about it, but I'd like to get some feedback.

Why is so much stress put on the religious affiliation of the characters? This isn't just an old couple, this is a *Jewish* old couple. And the Jewishness is important. Same with the military wife's Christianness and the homeless man's Muslimness. It's as if the director is saying, "Hey, look! She's a Christian! He's a Muslim!" The video doesn't just portray people experiencing grief and pain. The video portrays a Jew, a Christian and a Muslim experiencing grief and pain. Why? And then why do they all recite Baha'u'llah's words?

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ASSUMPTION OF MARY

Tomorrow, August 15, is the day when we in the Catholic Church celebrate the Assumption. The Assumption was the event at which Mary, after living out her earthly life, was taken up into heaven body and spirit. The Eastern Orthodox also celebrate this day, which they call the Dormition.

By receiving her physical body and ascending into heaven, Mary did what all of the saved will do at the end of time. In this way, as in so much else, she is a sign of hope for us and an exemplar.

As the Second Vatican Council taught in 1964,

> In the bodily and spiritual glory which she possesses in heaven, the Mother of Jesus continues in this present world as the image and first flowering of the Church as she is to be perfected in the world to come. Likewise, Mary shines forth on earth, until the day of the Lord shall come, as a sign of sure hope and solace for the pilgrim People of God.

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BAHA'I SUPERIORITY

In this post of the blog *Baha'i Rants*, Baquia complains about Baha'is taking an attitude of superiority toward other faiths. In the comments, I raised the question: well, isn't such an attitude intrinsic to the Baha'i teachings – in the sense that the Baha'i Faith is relevant to our time and the other religions aren't? Whereupon several Baha'i commenters insisted that that is not the case and there is absolutely no sense of superiority in the Baha'i writings.

Well, what about this?

> First among the great principles revealed by Him [Baha'u'llah] is that of the investigation of reality. The meaning is that every individual member of humankind is exhorted and commended to set aside superstitious beliefs, traditions and blind imitation of ancestral forms in religion and investigate reality for himself. Inasmuch as the fundamental reality is one, all religions and nations of the world will become one through investigation of reality. **The announcement of this principle is not found in any of the sacred Books of the past.**

That's from *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, page 433. This is an excerpt from a much longer passage. Abdu'l-Baha is explaining what is new about Baha'u'llah's teachings, and he goes through a litany of concepts that are supposedly absent from other religions and only found in the revelation of Baha'u'llah. He makes some really preposterous and offensive statements, such as saying the Baha'i Faith is the only religion that forbids racism, that it's the only

one that says that faith should be in accordance with reason, and that it's the only one that teaches that women should not be oppressed.

The flip side of Abdu'l-Baha's statements is this: he's insinuating that all other religions implicitly allow racism, obscurantism and the oppression of women. The only way to bring an end to these evils is by God bringing a new revelation, because the existing religions can do nothing about them.

> His Holiness Baha'u'llah has risen from the eastern horizon. Like the glory of the sun He has come into the world. He has reflected the reality of divine religion, dispelled the darkness of imitations, laid the foundation of new teachings and resuscitated the world. (Baha'i World Faith, p. 238)

What is the "darkness of imitations" Baha'u'llah came to dispell? What else could it be but *the other religions* in their modern form.

It's all well and good to say the Baha'i Faith embraces all religions. What Baha'is really mean (and they get this from Baha'u'llah and Abdu'l-Baha) is that all religions *originally* taught the truth, but have since been corrupted by human ignorance and arrogance. And then, inexplicably, Baha'is insist that there is nothing in the Baha'i writings to suggest any spirit of superiority, that they are tolerant of everybody's beliefs.

If Baha'is were genuinely open-minded, they would make an effort to understand what others actually believe, rather then spending their time telling us that our beliefs are wrong and if we want to be true Christians we should embrace Baha'u'llah. It isn't just modern-

day Baha'is that are like this. Abdu'l-Baha was the same way.

To demonstrate this point, we here at Baha'i-Catholic Blog have secured an exclusive interview with Abdu'l-Baha.

BCB– Good morning, Abdu'l-Baha, thank you for taking the time to meet with us.

AB– I am very happy at being present at this meeting (PUP p. 87). Are you happy?

BCB– Yes, thank you. Now I wonder if you could shed some light for us on how you view some essential Christian doctrines. Let's begin with the quintessential Christian ritual, baptism. I should clarify that in the Orthodox and Catholic traditions, baptism is much more than simply a ritual to demonstrate that the individual has chosen to believe in Christ. Rather, we believe that God has chosen baptism as a medium through which he infuses us with saving grace. What are your views on this?

AB– No, baptism is a only symbol of repentance (SAQ p. 91). The physical act of baptism is without spiritual effect. It is only a custom (SAQ p. 95).

BCB– It sounds as if you disapprove of the Christian belief on this point. Let's explore another area dear to the hearts of Christians, and particularly Orthodox and Catholic Christians – the Eucharist, or communion. The Second Vatican Council called the Eucharist "the source and summit of the Christian life" because it is through this sacrament, more than through any other means, that we are given the spiritual sustenance to become like Christ. We believe that it is the body and blood of Christ, and through it we are joined both

to Christ's suffering and to his eternal life. What do you think of our belief in the Eucharist?

AB– How can such a thought be conceived? God forbid! Certainly it is an absolute fantasy (SAQ p. 98). The mind cannot accept this. Children should be taught that the Eucharist is nothing more than a symbol (PUP p. 213).

BCB– It sounds as if you take objection to our faith on this point because you can't understand it. But I don't see why God can't do things that go beyond our ability as humans to understand. And certainly God can manipulate matter at his will. Catholics and Orthodox are comfortable with teachings like the physical presence of Christ in the Eucharist, because Christ can be physically present wherever he chooses. We see no need to draw a strict division between God and his creation. Take for example our belief in the resurrection of Christ. We believe that God the Son became a human being in order to perfect humankind. All those who join their humanity to his will enjoy the eternal life of God through him. Just as Christ's body was raised to eternal life on Easter morning, so too our bodies can be raised to eternal life along with our spirits. We see no reason why God cannot make a physical body eternal.

AB– Physical resurrection is not scientifically possible. Therefore, to insist on it is to cause religion to be at odds with science. The Baha'i Faith, on the other hand, is in perfect accord with science. The Christian clergy do not understand the Bible. When the Bible says Christ rose from the dead, what it means is that three days after Christ died, his disciples regained their confidence and started preaching (SAQ pp. 104-105).

BCB– I'm struck at your insistence that God will only act within the confines of physical laws. The Bible sometimes says things that seem to contradict what we know scientifically. Often that is simply because it is speaking poetically. And as anyone who has studied Church history will know, Christians have always read figurative meanings in the Bible rather than only taking it literally. Yet, at the same time, God is all-powerful and is capable of changing his creation to show signs on the earth. It says, for example, that at the end of the world the stars will fall from heaven. Whether that's to be taken literally I don't know, but I'm sure God could accomplish that if he so willed. What do you think?

AB– According to reason and science this thing is quite impossible, so this is obviously just a symbol (SAQ p. 112).

BCB– These views are striking when we consider that on other occasions you have said that God is unfathomable and inconceivable. For example, on June 9, 1912, you gave a talk at a Unitarian church in Philadelphia in which you said, "how can the human reality, which is limited, comprehend the eternal, unmanifest Creator? How can man comprehend the omniscient, omnipresent Lord?" Yet here you've insisted that fundamental Christian beliefs should be discarded because they are not logical and not consistent with current scientific knowledge. I can't help but wonder if you were making these arguments just to discredit Christianity, even though these arguments clearly contradict your teachings and those of your father regarding divine omnipotence. In any event, thank you for your time.

AB– You are very welcome, very welcome!

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BELIEVING "IN" AND BELIEVING "THAT"

A recent post on Baha'i Views (On the Baha'i Faith as in Harmony with True Christianity: Andre greets Osita) reminded me of a misleading approach that the Central Figures and modern Baha'is take when teaching Christians. A Christian asks a Baha'i if Baha'is believe in Christ, and the Baha'i responds by talking about what he believes about Christ and how positively Baha'is regard him. Here are a couple quotes from Abdu'l-Baha that are used in the post:

> Every soul who believed in Jesus Christ became revivified and resuscitated through this spirit, attained to the zenith of eternal glory, realized the life everlasting, experienced the second birth and rose to the acme of good fortune.
>
> ...Then know that for the dominion of the reality of Christ there is no beginning and there is no end. Everlastingly that luminous Entity hath been sitting on the throne of might and everlastingly It will have a penetrating dominion over the worlds of existence...

Quotes like these can serve to increase a seeker's comfort level, but they are not promoting true understanding. Rather, they are confusing the phrase "believe in" with the phrase "believe that".

What does it really mean to say one "believes in" Christ? Is it like believing in Santa Claus, as in believing that he exists? Is it like believing in your friend, i.e. that you have confidence in her? No, obviously when people say they believe in Christ they mean

something else.

When a Christian says she believes in Christ, that is shorthand for two things: first, that she believes a set of propositions about Christ, and second (which is based on the first), that she has a personal relationship with him. It is very unlikely the Christian is asking if Baha'is have a positive opinion of Christ, so responding by talking about how wonderful you think Christ is does not answer the question. The Christian wants to know if you believe what she believes about Christ.

From the Christian perspective, if you believe *in* Christ, that necessarily means you believe that Christ is the second person of the Trinity who took on a human body and spirit and then, after dying on the cross, brought that body and spirit to life for eternity on Easter morning. If Baha'is can't say they believe *that* those things are true, then they shouldn't be so nonchalant in telling Christians they believe *in* Christ. If they don't qualify what they mean by believing in Christ, then they are not so much teaching as misleading.

My own experience as a Baha'i was like that. I tried so hard to make Christians comfortable with the Baha'i Faith in hopes they would convert, that often Christians walked away from our conversations thinking the Baha'i Faith is a Christian denomination.

The solution to that is of course to explain that Christianity was a dispensation that lasted for only 600 years and was succeeded by Islam. The Baha'i Faith is not a denomination of anything, but a separate world religion. But then that only confuses people. "Wait, the Baha'i Faith isn't part of Christianity? Didn't you just say you

believe in Christ?”

Then you have to separate Christ and Christianity in the person’s mind, and persuade them that Christ was basically a Baha’i, not a Christian. So the conversation has gone from, “We believe the same thing. We both believe in Christ” to “Most of what you believe about Christ is wrong. Only Baha’is believe the truth about Christ.” Juxtaposed, these statements might make seekers think you were trying to pull a fast one on them.

[**Update 13 November 2021**: The *Baha’i Views* blog is gone now. It was originally on Blogger, but in 2008 it moved to a WordPress site temporarily, and that site is now gone. So I have replaced the links at the top of this post with links to the Wayback Machine’s copies.]

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BLOGGING ABOUT FOOTBALL SHOWS LIMITS TO INTER-FAITH UNDERSTANDING

A recent post on Barney Leith's blog Barnabas quotidianus exemplifies what I think is the great Baha'i double standard. Baha'is talk about the need for understanding other religions, but in practice they fail dismally to do so.

In his post, Mr. Leith describes an inter-faith conference between Christian clergy and Muslim imams in Norway. There was supposed to be a football (i.e. soccer) match at the end, but the Muslims objected to the presence of women on the Christian team. The Christians obligingly planned to have only men on the team, but the women clergy were angry at being left out. So they called off the match. The Muslims objected for a pretty straightforward reason. They regard co-ed athletics to be immodest.

Barney quotes some stuff from Baha'u'llah and concludes

> So, the purpose of religion is not to defend outmoded traditions. As we go further into the 21st century, we can no longer say, "If it was good enough for your father, it's good enough for you"

That's a very patronizing statement. No attempt to explain where the Muslims were coming from. Just a dismissive conclusion: the Muslims objected to the co-ed match because they blindly follow tradition.

Mr. Leith evidently thinks that Muslim imams can't think for themselves. He doesn't consider the possibility that they gave this a lot of thought and decided for themselves that mixing the genders in this way is inappropriate.

Both Muslims and Baha'is place a high priority on modesty and the propriety of behavior between men and women. There are certain activities that are just not appropriate in mixed company. Muslims and Baha'is will agree on this in principle. In how this principle is applied, however, there will be some differences.

Now, how do we decide how to apply this principle? Muslims and Baha'is have the same answer to this: defer to an authority who lived in the past. Muslims defer to the Qur'an, to the collections of reliable hadiths and to the decisions of jurisprudents. Baha'is defer to the writings of Baha'u'llah, Abdu'l-Baha and Shoghi Effendi.

Do you see the difference? I don't. So it strikes me as rather hypocritical of Mr. Leith to criticize the Muslims for their decision on what they regard as a moral issue. Baha'is wouldn't make the same decision, but they would arrive at a decision in the same way.

[**Update 13 November 2021**: Barney Leith ended his blog in 2010 (see his last post here), and the site has since left the Web, so I have changed the links to point to the Wayback Machine's copies of his blog.]

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CARDINAL MURPHY-O'CONNOR ON RELATIVISM

The following is from an address by Cormac Murphy-O'Connor, the archbishop of Westminster, 9 March 2006:

Many Europeans have convinced themselves that to be modern and free, they must be radically secular, autonomous, self-sufficient. The individual is happiest when most free – when he or she is unshackled by constraints of tradition and institutions. This idea has been taken up the state, and by the intellectual and cultural elite, so that a contrary view is often subject to ridicule or hostility. This is what Pope Benedict meant when he spoke, just before his election, of "the dictatorship of relativism" in Europe. It's not that the Pope does not realise that there are many different religious and cultural and intellectual traditions co-existing in Europe. The Pope believes in tolerance and dialogue. But he is not a relativist. He fiercely opposes the idea that because there are different versions of truth that therefore there is no truth or worse, that the truth has to be whatever each person declares it to be. The dictatorship of relativism is the imposition of this idea that there is no such thing as common or shared values; that human beings cannot seek the truth together. The dictatorship of relativism undermines not just religion. It undermines the idea of culture and family and association.

Pope Benedict is alarmed by this, because he knows that the deepest

currents of history are not fundamentally political or economic but spiritual and cultural. He knows this from the history of Europe and, in particular, the history of his own Germany and from his association with Pope John Paul. Poland survived as a nation, not because of economics or politics – it was written out of the map of Europe for one hundred and fifty years – but by its culture; by its faith; by its dogged clinging to an interior reality, beyond the reach of the state, which was what really made Poland. The history of Ireland has much that demonstrates this too. A nation is ultimately shaped not by ideology, and not by the free market –ideologies come and go; economies rise and fall – but by what people honour and cherish and worship; by what society deems to be true and good. That is its rock; everything else is like the shifting sands on a beach.

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CATHOLICISM ON JESUS AND GOD

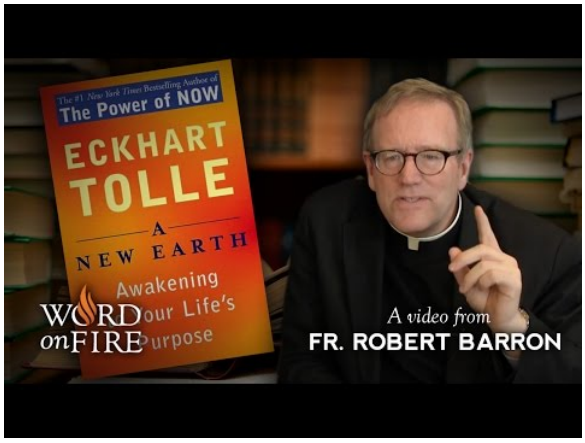
I've never heard of Eckhart Tolle, but the priest's comments are useful beyond just commenting on Tolle's book. He provides a good sense of where Catholics are coming from in regard to the Western world's prevailing spirituality.

[YouTube: This video is unavailable]

(h/t Mark Shea)

Edit on 12 November 2021: The video I linked to has disappeared from YouTube, but for what it's worth I found another video of then-Father Barron talking about Eckhart Tolle, here:

☐ Video:



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“CHRIST’S PEACE IS NOT THE SIMPLE ABSENCE OF CONFLICT.”

The following is an address given by Pope Benedict XVI on 19 August 2007, discussing Christ’s statement that he has come not to bring peace but division:

Dear Brothers and Sisters!

There is an expression of Jesus’ in this Sunday’s Gospel that always draws our attention and which needs to be properly understood. As he is on his way to Jerusalem, where death on the cross awaits him, Christ confides in his disciples: “Do you think that I have come to establish peace on the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division.”

And he adds: “From now on a household of five will be divided, three against two and two against three; a father will be divided against his son and a son against his father, a mother against her daughter and a daughter against her mother, a mother-in-law against her daughter-in-law and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law” (Luke 12:51-53).

Whoever knows the least amount about the Gospel of Christ knows that it is the message of peace par excellence; Jesus himself, as St. Paul writes, “is our peace” (Ephesians 2:14); he died and rose from the dead to break down the wall of enmity and inaugurated the Kingdom of God, which is love, joy, and peace.

How, then, are we to explain these words of his? To what is the Lord referring when he says that he has come to bring — according to St.

Luke's redaction — "division," or — according to St. Matthew's — the "sword" (Matthew 10:34)?

Christ's expression means the peace that he came to bring is not synonymous with the simple absence of conflict. On the contrary, the peace of Jesus is the fruit of a constant struggle against evil. The battle that Jesus has decided to fight is not against men or human powers but against the enemy of God and man, Satan.

Those who desire to resist this enemy, remaining faithful to God and the good, must necessarily deal with misunderstandings and sometimes very real persecution. Thus, those who intend to follow Jesus and commit themselves without compromises to the truth must know that they will face opposition and will become, despite themselves, a sign of division among persons, even within their own families.

Love of one's parents is indeed a sacred commandment, but for it to be lived authentically it cannot be set in opposition to the love of God and Christ. In such a way, in the footsteps of the Lord Jesus, Christians must become "instruments of his peace," according to the celebrated expression of St. Francis of Assisi. This is not an inconsistent and superficial peace but a real one, pursued with courage and tenacity in the daily commitment to defeat evil with good (cf. Romans 12:21), paying in person the price that this carries with it.

The Virgin Mary, Queen of Peace, shared the struggle of her son Jesus against the evil one, to the point of spiritual martyrdom, and she continues to share this struggle until the end of time. Let us invoke her maternal intercession, that she may help us always to be

faithful witnesses to Christ's peace, never giving in to compromises with evil.

(Translated by the Zenit news agency.)

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CHRISTMAS IN IRAN

Courtesy of Lew Rockwell by way of Andrew Cusack. They have more pictures. Take a look.

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COMPARING THE BAHA'I FAST AND LENT

When I was a Baha'i, another Baha'i mentioned that she was teaching (i.e. talking about the Faith to a non-Baha'i) a Christian and told her that the Baha'i Fast is sort of like Lent. In this year, 2022, the Baha'i Fast and Lent happen to begin on the same day, March 2, so I think this is a good opportunity to talk about these two traditions and see how similar they actually are.

What is Lent?

Lent is a season of the Christian year in which Christians abstain from certain foods or do other things as a way of strengthening their spiritual life. It is observed for 40 days before Easter. In modern Roman Catholicism, people do this by giving up something they like, and/or by doing some extra act of service or charity. Traditionally Catholics gave up meat, but nowadays most give up something else, like sweets or TV or social media.

It is traditional in Christianity to observe a season of fast and abstinence (called a penitential season) prior to a major feast day. In Catholicism the two main penitential seasons are Advent, the season preceding Christmas Day on December 25, and Lent, the season preceding Easter which usually occurs in April.

Easter is the most important holiday in Christianity, commemorating the Resurrection of Christ. That makes Lent the most important penitential season of the year.

Note: Not all Christians observe Lent, but most do. Catholics, Orthodox, and mainline Protestants (e.g. Lutherans, Anglicans, Methodists, Presbyterians) observe Lent in some form. That represents around 75% of the world's Christians. Pentecostals, Baptists, and Evangelicals (including so-called "non-denominationals"), the Christians that many English-speaking Baha'is are most familiar with, do not observe Lent.

What is the Baha'i Fast?

The Baha'i Fast is a period of 19 days (which is one Baha'i month) during which Baha'is abstain from eating or drinking anything between sunrise and sunset. It ends with Naw-Ruz, the first day of the new year on the Baha'i calendar. Naw-Ruz always falls on the March equinox (i.e. the Spring equinox in the northern hemisphere), so the fast always starts around March 1–2.

Are they similar?

Was my Baha'i friend justified in calling the Baha'i Fast "sort of like Lent"? Yes, I think it's a fine comparison.

The fundamental purpose of both is the same. You give up good things that you like so you can focus more on God. Catholicism and the Baha'i Faith both recognize that God created the world and the world is good, but we can allow the good world to distract us from the Ultimate Good. By abstaining from those things, we remember that our happiness and well being don't depend on these created things but on God.

For me, remembrance is the key thing in fasting. When I was a

Baha'i, during the Fast I would get hungry and think, "I should eat something," and then a second later I'd remember, "Oh yeah, it's the Fast." My hunger reminded me of God. Then at sunset, when I could eat again, I'd remember God again, because it was God's law that had said I could eat again after sunset.

Now, as a Catholic, it's a similar experience. I give something up for Lent. Then, when I want to go do that thing I remember, "No, I'm not doing that, because it's Lent." And then Sunday rolls around, or Easter comes, and I can do that thing again, I remember God again, knowing that I get to have this nice thing because God made it, and also that Sundays and Easter are special days.

How the Baha'i Fast and Lent are different

While they are similar in their overall purpose, they are not directly related to each other and are practiced differently.

- Lent is for 40 days. The Baha'i Fast is for 19 days.
- During Lent, your abstinence (giving something up) lasts 24 hours a day. During the Baha'i Fast, you avoid all food and drink, but only during daylight hours.

So the Baha'i Fast involves giving up more things but over a short period of time, while Catholic Lent lasts longer – more days and more hours of the day.

Which one is better?

I don't think either one is "better" than the other. One might be better suited to an individual's personality rather than another one.

Personally I find Lent more challenging. Going hungry during the Baha'i Fast was hard, but it's only for 12 hours and then you can eat whatever you want. On the other hand, giving up chocolate during Lent is really painful for me, because I have to go days and days without it.

I could see how a Baha'i might think Catholic Lent is lame, because you choose the thing you give up. But that puts more responsibility on the individual Catholic to choose a item that would be a big deal to them. Yes, an individual Catholic could cheat by giving up something they don't care about anyway. But there are ways to cheat the system with the Baha'i Fast, too, by staying up all night and sleeping half the day. If you follow the intent of each practice, they both achieve the desired result, which is to center your thoughts on God and train you not to be focused so much on created things.

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CREDO

Three weeks ago John made this comment on the thread Shoghi Effendi and Christian Authority:

Given that you are a convert to the Roman Catholic faith I wonder if a good place to start may be the nature of God, of man and of Jesus Christ. As there are many views on these questions among Christians in general, and amongst some Roman Catholics, it would be interesting to explore these questions to see if it is possible for us to arrive at a common understanding about them. If you are interested in pursuing these themes a good start may be for you to outline the nature of the God you believe in, the nature and purpose of man and his relationship with God and the nature and purpose of Jesus Christ in your world view. A more fundamental question is what is the purpose of creation per se.

I've been remiss in getting back to this. Haven't had time for blogging in a while. But now I can take a crack at it.

The easiest way to sum up my belief would be to recite the Nicene Creed. But instead I'll put my beliefs in my own words.

The nature of God

God is eternal, which means he exists outside of time. He created everything that exists, including time and space. God is a community of persons: Father, Son and Holy Spirit (called the Trinity).

(Since leaving the Baha'i Faith and becoming Christian, I have fallen

out of the habit of capitalizing pronouns when referring to God. Hope that isn't too distracting.)

The nature and purpose of man and his relationship with God

Man, like all of God's creatures, are created first and foremost to glorify God. They also reflect the image of God according to their nature. So in man, the love between men reflects the love within the Trinity. When a husband and wife have a child, for example, this is an image of the procession of the Holy Spirit from the love shared by the Father and the Son.

Humans consist of body and soul. The two together make up a human being. So we glorify God and reflect his nature by means of both our body and our soul. That's why, for example, we perform movements when we worship: have processions, kneel before the Eucharist, etc. We worship God according to our nature, and our nature includes our body.

God calls us to be in relationship with him, and to participate in his work. So when God creates a new person, he includes us in the act (through the marital embrace). When God saves a soul from sin, he includes us in that too (through our teaching, or our companionship, or through sacraments which we humans perform, or whatever God calls us to do).

The nature and purpose of Jesus Christ

Jesus Christ is the link between us and God. I mentioned above that our purpose is to be in relationship with God and to participate in God's work. Ultimately we are to be with God for eternity. Jesus Christ is how that happens. He brings us into the life of the Trinity.

There's a line in the liturgy: "May we come to share in the divinity of Christ, who humbled himself to share in our humanity." So this is how the link takes place: Christ, who is God, becomes a human being, so that human beings who join themselves to him may share in his divinity.

There's a lot more I could say about everything I've written above, but this is sufficient for now.

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CRUSADE MYTHS

Here is a good, short webpage debunking some widely-held myths about the Crusades. The author is Thomas F. Madden, a professional historian.

Some of the myths he debunks:

> Myth 1: The Crusades were wars of unprovoked aggression against a peaceful Muslim world.
>
> Myth 3: When the Crusaders captured Jerusalem in 1099 they massacred every man, woman, and child in the city until the streets ran ankle deep with the blood.
>
> Myth 5: The Crusades were also waged against the Jews.

And while we're at it, take a gander at Professor Madden's review of the recent film "Kingdom of Heaven."

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DOCTRINES ARE DIFFERENT FROM CHARACTER

Christians believe that their religion has the fullness of truth, and it necessarily follows from that that another religion is less true to the extent it disagrees with Christianity.

A lot of people get offended at this, for a variety of reasons. I'd like to address one possible reason here.

A response one sometimes hears to the Christian perspective is this: Christians don't act any better than other people. They're not more loving or more devoted to God or more faithful than the followers of other religions. In fact, when young Christians make friends with the followers of other faiths for the first time, they can become confused. The good that they see in the non-Christian makes them wonder what makes Christianity so special.

So how can we say that Christianity has the fullness of truth, if one sees no difference in virtues and character between Christians and non-Christians?

This question is based on a confusion of two different things: truth and virtue. The fact is that one can know the truth without being virtuous, and one can be virtuous without knowing the truth.

Just because someone knows that Jesus is the Son of God, that does not necessarily mean that they live righteously. On the other hand, someone can be unaware that Jesus is the Son of God and still desire to do the right thing. What we know in our intellect and what

we desire to do are two different things.

A physiologist can know intellectually what foods are healthy, but he might still eat junk food. Someone with limited knowledge of nutrition can still be drawn to healthy foods.

Knowing facts about reality doesn't make us act better. "Jesus is the Son of God" is a fact, in the same sense that "heat rises" and "Montpelier is the capital of Vermont" are facts. They're all true, but acknowledging their truth doesn't make us better people.

By the same token, it is not logical to say, "That guy is a jerk, therefore if he thinks Montpelier is the capital of Vermont, he must be wrong."

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EPHESIANS AND THE UNITY OF MANKIND

Many Baha'is believe that Christianity is a message of individual salvation while the Baha'i Faith is about the salvation of the human race. This is a false contrast, based on a misunderstanding of Christianity. The post will be the first in a series intended to refute this notion.

In a comment to the post Shoghi Effendi and Christian Authority, Mr. Poirier quoted a passage from Shoghi Effendi's *The Promised Day Is Come*, p. 119:

The Revelation associated with the Faith of Jesus Christ focused attention primarily on the redemption of the individual and the molding of his conduct, and stressed, as its central theme, the necessity of inculcating a high standard of morality and discipline into man, as the fundamental unit in human society. Nowhere in the Gospels do we find any reference to the unity of nations or the unification of mankind as a whole. When Jesus spoke to those around Him, He addressed them primarily as individuals rather than as component parts of one universal, indivisible entity.

Only by reading the New Testament as a whole (along with some notable sections of the Old Testament) can you see the magnitude of how way off Shoghi Effendi is. Since I can't quote all of that on this blog, what I will do in this and subsequent posts in this series, God willing, is to point out a few passages here and there.

This passage is from the second chapter of Paul's letter to the

Ephesians:

Therefore, remember that at one time you, Gentiles in the flesh, called the uncircumcision by those called the circumcision, which is done in the flesh by human hands, were at that time without Christ, alienated from the community of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, without hope and without God in the world.

But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have become near by the blood of Christ. For he is our peace, he who made both one and broke down the dividing wall of enmity, through his flesh, abolishing the law with its commandments and legal claims, that he might create in himself one new person in place of the two, thus establishing peace, and might reconcile both with God, in one body, through the cross, putting that enmity to death by it.

He came and preached peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near, for through him we both have access in one Spirit to the Father. So then you are no longer strangers and sojourners, but you are fellow citizens with the holy ones and members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the capstone. Through him the whole structure is held together and grows into a temple sacred in the Lord; in him you also are being built together into a dwelling place of God in the Spirit.

Observe:

As Paul describes it, there were two parts to the human race, the Hebrews and the Gentiles. But that separation is done away in Christ. The cross (i.e. the event of the crucifixion) erases the

disunity in the human race and forges a single humanity.

(This is echoed in some other places in Paul's writings, such as in Galatians, *there is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus,* and in Colossians, *here there is not Greek and Jew, circumcision and uncircumcision, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free; but Christ is all and in all.*)

Far from depicting salvation as an individual matter, he portrays the community of believers as a single unit. Notice the metaphors Paul uses in the third paragraph quoted above (i.e. verses 17-22). The Church is a household, both in the sense of a family and in the sense of a building. Other words he uses are structure, temple and dwelling. And in the second paragraph the Church is a single person, with Christ the head.

That is the vision of Christianity: a single body of believers, welded together (or to use Paul's metaphors here, grafted together and mortared together) into a single community that, as a unit, is saved by Christ and reconciled to God. And this is the Christian vision of mankind's unity: that we are united through the blood of the cross – united with each other at the same time we are united with God.

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EPIPHANY?

I found on Baha'i Views a quote from another Baha'i blog, The Many Adventures of Shireen, where she says in the post Epiphany,

> I feel we are now at a pivotal time in human history. Society is crying out for spiritual fulfillment and direction; the religious regimes of the past are no longer functional in that sense. We are in dire need of a drastic paradigm shift in order to align our understanding of existence in this world with that of what God has been telling us through His Manifestations

Shireen was just speaking for herself, of course, but I would be interested in hearing how other Baha'is react to this quote. The reason I single it out is that it raises some questions in my mind.

What is Baha'u'llah telling us that is different from what past Manifestations told us? How are the needs we face now different from the needs of past dispensations? What exactly is the paradigm shift that we have to undergo now?

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FROM HINDU TO BAHA'I TO CHRISTIAN

Guess I'm not the only one. Here's a Hindu woman who embraced the Baha'i Faith, and five years later resigned and became a Christian. She is now a member of the Orthodox Church.

Here is her story. For a blog post, it is exceedingly long (15 type-written pages), but well worth reading. I am amazed at how similar her experience was to mine (except I came from an agnostic background instead of Hindu). Her attraction to the Faith, her puzzlement at the contradictions, and her experience with Protestantism are all similar to my own, and what she says about Eastern Orthodoxy is how I feel about Catholicism.

Two bloggers, Crunchy Con and Wholly Roamin' Catholic, comment on the story.

My thanks to Steve Marshall for the nice tip.

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FURTHER EVIDENCE THAT THE BAHA'I FAITH IS TEXT-CENTERED

When I wrote the post Shoghi Effendi and Christian authority, I came under criticism that I hadn't expected. I mentioned as an aside that in the Baha'i Faith, religion is text-based, and this predisposes Baha'is to misunderstand other religions by assuming that they are always summed up in their text.

Well, a few days ago Marco Oliveira demonstrated my point.

Mr. Oliveira, a Baha'i and author of the blog Povo de Baha, was commenting on my reaction to his comments on Youtube (see A "very ironic" defense of the Pope) . In the comment thread he observed,

> Maybe it is important to define what do we mean by a "Catholic tradition". Do we mean a set of teachings that exist on the Bible? Do we mean a set of teachings plus several dogmas? Do we add to that several teachings produced by Church Councils and theologians?
>
> The Papacy is a human construction. Even if one claims it has divine guidance, it is a fact that it is not mentioned in the Bible.
>
> it is not part of the Christian sacred writings. Unless one believes that a council-made-dogma has the same value as the Writings...

It is clear from these statements that he regards the Bible as the

only valid source of Christian doctrine. He's even telling me that, as a Catholic, I shouldn't believe in the validity of ecumenical councils or obey the pope because these things aren't found in the "Christian sacred writings".

Thus, for Mr. Oliveira, it is writings that determine Christianity. A Christian must have a written revelation to justify any belief or practice. Like I said in the thread Shoghi Effendi and Christian authority, not all religions work this way. But Mr. Oliveira doesn't seem to know that, probably because he has been taught as a Baha'i that there are Manifestations and they bring revelations and those revelations form the basis, and the only basis, for everything that goes on in that religion.

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“GOD DOES NOT MAKE MEN HOLY AND SAVE THEM MERELY AS INDIVIDUALS”

From Lumen Gentium*, one of the principal documents of the Second Vatican Council, promulgated in 1964:*

At all times and in every race God has given welcome to whosoever fears Him and does what is right. God, however, does not make men holy and save them merely as individuals, without bond or link between one another. Rather has it pleased Him to bring men together as one people, a people which acknowledges Him in truth and serves Him in holiness. He therefore chose the race of Israel as a people unto Himself. With it He set up a covenant. Step by step He taught and prepared this people, making known in its history both Himself and the decree of His will and making it holy unto Himself. All these things, however, were done by way of preparation and as a figure of that new and perfect covenant, which was to be ratified in Christ, and of that fuller revelation which was to be given through the Word of God Himself made flesh.

“Behold the days shall come saith the Lord, and I will make a new covenant with the House of Israel, and with the house of Judah … I will give my law in their bowels, and I will write it in their heart, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people … For all of them shall know Me, from the least of them even to the greatest, saith the Lord.” Christ instituted this new covenant, the new testament, that is to say, in His Blood, calling together a people made up of Jew and

gentile, making them one, not according to the flesh but in the Spirit. This was to be the new People of God. For those who believe in Christ, who are reborn not from a perishable but from an imperishable seed through the word of the living God, not from the flesh but from water and the Holy Spirit, are finally established as “a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a purchased people … who in times past were not a people, but are now the people of God”.

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“IF WE BELIEVE THAT GOD IS LOCATED IN THE HEAVENS, THEN THE BIRDS…

Here are some excerpts from the pope’s sermon at midnight Mass on Christmas Eve:

Saint John, in his Gospel, went to the heart of the matter, giving added depth to Saint Luke’s brief account of the situation in Bethlehem: “He came to his own home, and his own people received him not”. …

These words refer ultimately to us, to each individual and to society as a whole. Do we have time for our neighbour who is in need of a word from us, from me, or in need of my affection? For the sufferer who is in need of help? For the fugitive or the refugee who is seeking asylum? Do we have time and space for God? Can he enter into our lives? Does he find room in us, or have we occupied all the available space in our thoughts, our actions, our lives for ourselves? …

In the stable at Bethlehem, Heaven and Earth meet. Heaven has come down to Earth. For this reason, a light shines from the stable

for all times; for this reason joy is enkindled there; for this reason song is born there.

At the end of our Christmas meditation I should like to quote a remarkable passage from Saint Augustine. Interpreting the invocation in the Lord's Prayer: "Our Father who art in Heaven", he asks: what is this – Heaven? And where is Heaven? Then comes a surprising response: "... who art in Heaven – that means: in the saints and in the just. Yes, the heavens are the highest bodies in the universe, but they are still bodies, which cannot exist except in a given location. Yet if we believe that God is located in the heavens, meaning in the highest parts of the world, then the birds would be more fortunate than we, since they would live closer to God. Yet it is not written: 'The Lord is close to those who dwell on the heights or on the mountains', but rather: 'the Lord is close to the brokenhearted', an expression which refers to humility. Just as the sinner is called 'Earth', so by contrast the just man can be called 'Heaven'."

Heaven does not belong to the geography of space, but to the geography of the heart. And the heart of God, during the Holy Night, stooped down to the stable: the humility of God is Heaven. And if we approach this humility, then we touch Heaven. Then the Earth too is made new. With the humility of the shepherds, let us set out, during this Holy Night, towards the Child in the stable! Let us touch God's humility, God's heart! Then his joy will touch us and will make the world more radiant. Amen.

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INDEPENDENT INVESTIGATION OF TRUTH

A reader named Lukas recently made this observation in the comment thread under the post Resurrection Pie:

> That is to say, the only way to test the validity of Baha'u'llah's claims (or the claims of anyone calling themselves the return of Christ) is independently, for oneself; otherwise one is conditioning one's faith upon the judgment and faith of others. Was this not exactly what caused the Jewish people to reject Christ as the Messiah? That the religious authorities denounced Him, since He failed, according to their understanding, to fulfill the prophecies regarding the Messiah? That the people as a whole accepted the judgment of the authorities against Him? Therefore it is clear to me that the institutions of the previous Divine Revelation are in no way an acceptable standard of measuring the validity of the Christ when He appears.

I actually believe the same thing in reverse. I believe that many Baha'is don't investigate the claims of Christianity fairly because they uncritically accept what the Central Figures and Shoghi Effendi said about it. Shoghi Effendi said that Christ was born of a Virgin, so Baha'is believe it. If he had said he wasn't, then they wouldn't. Abdu'l-Baha said that Christ was speaking figuratively when he called himself the bread of heaven, so Baha'is believe him. And then Baha'is tell us Christians that we should investigate the truth for

ourselves instead of blindly accepting what our "religious institutions" tell us. Sounds like the pot calling the kettle black.

How do you know that a book of Baha'i history is accurate? Because it was published by a Baha'i Publishing Trust? That's not independent investigation of truth.

How do you know that when a Baha'i author says Baha'u'llah fulfilled a particular prophecy from some religion, that he is both quoting the prophecy accurately and reporting the event in Baha'u'llah's life accurately? Because the author is a respected Baha'i? That's not independent investigation of truth.

When I was a Baha'i, one of my favorite books was *Portals to Freedom*. My perception of Abdu'l-Baha was therefore partly dependent upon Howard Colby Ives. In other words, it wasn't independent. This example can be multiplied a hundredfold – for Taherzadeh, for Ruhe, for Esslemont, etc.

There are also subtler forms of influence. The way you were raised, and the culture you were formed in, shaped how you see the world, and therefore how you will evaluate truth claims. You are also influenced by the kinds of friendships you form. If a seeker is particularly impressed by a certain Baha'i, she will be favorably disposed to accepting the Baha'i message, whereas that same woman in a different situation, meeting a different Baha'i and having a different relationship, may not.

I'm not waiting for the Church to tell me if a self-proclaimed Messiah is the return of Christ. It isn't that simplistic. I have faith that the Catholic belief system is true, and within that belief system

the phrase “return of Christ” has a certain meaning. You have faith in the Baha’i belief system and have accepted its definition of “return of Christ”, a definition which Baha’u’llah fits.

Baha’u’llah’s claims are only compelling if you already accept the Baha’i Faith’s way of seeing things. If you don’t, then Baha’u’llah’s claims are nonsensical.

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JUST WONDERING…

Why is it that every Baha'i blog I see includes a disclaimer that any views expressed here are those of the blogger only and do not necessarily represent the worldwide Baha'i community, its institutions or subsidiaries (or words to that effect)? Is there a rule somewhere that all Baha'i bloggers have to put that? I haven't seen that kind of thing on other religious blogs.

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MATT'S COMMENT

Matt left a comment on the thread Believing "in" and believing "that" that is too off-topic to discuss there. On the other hand, it touches on a common Baha'i apologetic tactic, which basically goes like this: "Christian interpretations of the Bible disagree with Jewish interpretations, and you believe Christianity is true. Therefore, Baha'i interpretations of the Bible can also be true".

Here is Matt's comment:

> Hmmmm…
>
> Jewish polemicists have been accusing Christians for centuries of pretending to believe and follow the Torah, but "mean something entirely different than us", and thus have been derided of "omission." In fact, they accuse Jesus personally of willfully deceiving the public who "don't know any better" with his convenient quotations of some verses from the Tanakh, and avoidance of other quotations that wouldn't bolster his claim.
>
> Christian polemicists have been accusing Muslims for centuries of "not really" believing in Jesus and the prophets of the Tanakh, and at one point derided them as "heretical Christians" because they couldn't wrap their minds around the idea that a religious community independent from Christianity could exist, even if it was "false."
>
> Muslim polemicists have been accusing Baha'is for one-hundred and sixty-four years of pretending to believe in the

> Qur'an and the prophethood of Muhammad (pbuh), but "mean something entirely different than us" by it. I guess my question is if all of this supposed deception is so well-known by the "knowledgeable" of each preceding religious community in reference to the "new, false" religious community, what motivation would the "new, false" community have to keep continuing to doing such a horrible job of deceiving people who apparently can't be deceived? Or is there something else going on?
>
> I'm not a Baha'i, by the way. I just think it is something to think about….

I'm confused by your question and I'm not sure exactly what you're getting at. Let me try to rephrase it to make sure I don't misunderstand you: Baha'is don't really distort the meaning of the Bible, because knowledgeable Christians accuse them of doing so. If Baha'i distortion were as obvious as "knowledgeable" Christians claim it is, then why would Baha'is continue to do it?

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MOOJAN MOMEN IS RIGHT

A few days ago I became aware of this new article by Moojan Momen discussing the ex-Baha'i phenomenon, "Marginality and Apostasy in the Baha'i Community". The article can be read on ResearchGate and on Momen's personal website (links updated 2021).

Momen's argument is that you see this new phenomenon emerging in the Baha'i community in the past 25 years or so – a community of ex-Baha'is has developed. It used to be that someone who didn't like the Faith would go and become an ex-Baha'i by themselves, criticizing the Faith on their own. But in recent years some of these people have formed a community. Isn't that strange? What changed? Why now, and why has it taken this form? These are the kind of questions this article is seeking to answer.

I read some responses on the web by various ex-Baha'is. None of them like the piece. Some were sarcastic (a little puerile, don't you think?), some were dismissive, some attempted rebuttals (none of them very effective), and some were even angry and hostile. I'm really puzzled by all this, because it seems to me Momen is on to something.

When I left the Baha'i community I looked on the Internet for an ex-Baha'i community. Not that I wanted to "join" one, but I wanted to know if my thoughts were shared by others, and if there were people out there who could help me think things through. There was a community, all right, but they couldn't help me. All they wanted to do was talk about the evil, dictatorial "AO" all day. I couldn't relate

to that at all, because, though I had had some bad experiences with the administration (anyone who's in the community longer than six months is going to face that), they weren't anything to merit getting one's panties in a wad years after the fact. I was kind of perplexed by these people. It didn't sound like they had belonged to any Baha'i Faith that I had experienced.

And you know what? They act exactly the way Momen describes them:

> [Various episodes] are told and retold in apostate e-mails and on apostate websites and indeed have now become so firmly a part of the apostate mythology that they no longer need to be recounted in full, a single word or phrase is sufficient to invoke their mythological presence.

I haven't done any social scientific research, so I can't confirm in a scholarly way what Momen is saying, but it certainly agrees with what I've seen anecdotally. I have also seen a canonical narrative constructed, a set of events and historical figures that have taken on legendary status. And it revolves around… [cue dissonant chord] *the AO!*

What a bunch of losers. They construct a whole groupthink around the accusation that the AO enforces groupthink.

A few points to clear up:

1) "Marginality and Apostasy" is an academic article. It uses the term "apostate" according to how it is defined in the academic literature. If you think you're scoring points by quoting the dictionary definition of "apostate", you're missing the point.

2) Once again, “Marginality and Apostasy” is an academic article. It thus makes a scholarly argument that contributes to the religious studies literature. The article, the real article, is being posted in an academic journal to be read by people with PhDs. It is not an Internet flame war. If you respond to it as if it were, you’re missing the point.

3) As an academic article, it is not enough to refute it by noting that some of his facts are wrong. It is helpful and valuable to note those mistakes. Based on reading some of the ex-Baha’i responses, it appears he may have made some factual errors with regard to some of his case studies. By all means address these. Every academic article and book is a work in progress. But if you’re trying to prove him wrong overall, then you also have to take his main argument into account.

Momen wouldn’t have had any reason to include me in his article even if he knew about me, since I don’t fit with the crowd he set out to explain. But reading his article still caused me to think about what I’m doing with this blog. And since this post is a break from my normal subject matter anyway, allow me a moment of self-reflection:

I suppose it’s inevitable that my blog would be lumped in with the “ex-Baha’i” crowd. Baha’i websites don’t acknowledge this blog, and ex-Baha’is of various sorts link to it. So both Baha’is and ex-Baha’is seem to agree on the category I belong in. But this categorization is arbitrary. In some ways I have more in common with Glenford Mitchell than I do with most ex-Baha’is. In other ways, they’re both

pretty far from where I am.

To use the terminology Momen uses in his article, I was a leavetaker. I simply lost my faith in Baha'u'llah and stopped participating in the community. Momen uses Bromley's definition of apostate: "[the term refers] not to ordinary religious leavetakers . . . but to that subset of leavetakers who are involved in contested exits and affiliate with an oppositional coalition". My exit was not contested, and I did not affiliate with an oppositional coalition. I didn't join an ex-Baha'i community (although I might have if I had found one I could relate to). But I did join the Christian community, and I formed a Christian identity that has pretty much entirely replaced my old Baha'i identity. Then, after all that, I got onto the Internet to defend Christianity from Baha'i polemics.

Granted, I am an ex-Baha'i in the sense that I used to be a Baha'i and then I stopped believing in it. But that doesn't put me in the same tradition as Juan Cole, Karen Bacquet and Alison Marshal. I am rather in the same tradition as Augustine of Hippo, Francis de Sales and John Henry Newman – defenders of the Gospel from those who would distort it. Unlike most active ex-Baha'is, my goal here is not to attack the administration or call for a change in the Baha'i community. I'm here to engage the Baha'i discourse from outside it.

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“MY DAUGHTER, WHOM I HAVE CHOSEN FOR MYSELF”

An excerpt from the words of Jesus Christ spoken to the mystic St. Birgitta of Sweden, who lived in the 14th century:

But you, my daughter, whom I have chosen for myself and with whom I speak in spirit, love me with all your heart, not as you love your son or daughter or relatives but more than anything in the world! I created you and spared none of my limbs in suffering for you. And yet I love your soul so dearly that, if it were possible, I would let myself be nailed to the cross again rather than lose you. Imitate my humility: I, who am the king of glory and of angels, was clothed in lowly rags and stood naked at the pillar while my ears heard all kinds of insults and derision. Prefer my will to yours, because my Mother, your Lady, from beginning to end, never wanted anything but what I wanted. If you do this, then your heart will be with my heart, and it will be set aflame with my love in the same way as any dry thing is easily set aflame by fire. Your soul will be filled with me and I will be in you, and all temporal things will become bitter to you and all carnal desire like poison. You will rest in my divine arms, where there is no carnal desire, only joy and spiritual delight. There the soul, both inwardly and outwardly delighted, is full of joy, thinking of nothing and desiring nothing but the joy that it possesses. So love me alone, and you will have all the things you wish, and you will have them in abundance. Is it not written that the widow’s oil did not fail until the day that the Lord sent rain upon the earth according to the words of the prophet? I

am the true prophet. If you believe my words and fulfill them, oil and joy and exultation will never fail you for all eternity.

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MY OWN PRIVATE MALIETOA

Yesterday was the funeral for Malietoa Tanumafili II. When I was a Baha'i, I felt very proud of him. He was the only living monarch in the world who recognized Baha'u'llah. There are several passages where Baha'u'llah extols those monarchs who embrace his cause. Here is one:

> How great is the blessedness that awaiteth the king who will arise to aid My Cause in My Kingdom, who will detach himself from all else but Me! Such a king is numbered with the companions of the Crimson Ark, the Ark which God hath prepared for the people of Bahá. All must glorify his name, must reverence his station, and aid him to unlock the cities with the keys of My Name, the omnipotent Protector of all that inhabit the visible and invisible kingdoms. Such a king is the very eye of mankind, the luminous ornament on the brow of creation, the fountainhead of blessings unto the whole world. Offer up, O people of Bahá, your substance, nay your very lives, for his assistance.

Every time I read that, I thought of Malietoa Tanumafili.

So it's a little weird to hear that he's died. Not that it's tragic. He has lived a full life and is in a better place now. But it's weird because even after I left the Faith, in the back of my mind I was still aware of him. It was almost like he was a little piece of my old Baha'i life floating around out there. But not anymore.

It's like that for all the little bits and pieces of the Baha'i world I

inhabited. The Baha'i world I knew, and will always know, was pretty much the Baha'i world of the late 1990s and early 2000s. It's been almost four years since I went inactive and left the community. In those four years I've changed, and the Baha'i community has changed too. They've added new administrative stuff (clusters). The emphasis on Ruhi seems to have increased. The personnel in the various institutions has changed a bit. In future decades even the Baha'i culture will evolve as the demographics shift and as my cohort grows older. With each passing year the Baha'i world that I knew fades slowly away.

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NAW-RUZ POTLUCK IDEAS

Happy new year! My congratulations to all my Baha'i readers for surviving another Fast.

Naw-ruz was probably my favorite Baha'i holiday. I was always relieved the fasting was over. It wasn't just the going hungry and thirsty. It was the waking up before sunrise, and the having to give up snacking (something I'm very fond of).

One thing about Naw-ruz though... It seems like non-Baha'is who celebrate it have a lot more going on than the Baha'is do. It's not just the "Seven S's" table, which I never saw in my 9 Naw-ruzes as a Baha'i, even at Persian homes. Apparently Iranians also have this jolly fellow to spread Naw-ruz cheer. Not quite an Ayyam-i-Ha Camel, but hey. And the best part about non-Baha'i Naw-ruz is, you jump over fire.

Imagine how lively Baha'i potlucks would be with all that stuff going on at the Center. LSA Social Committees, are you taking notes?

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NEW RESOURCES PAGE

If you look at the top of the page you'll see a new tab, "Resources," next to "Front Page" and "About." This was inspired by a recent reading of Mirza Abu'l-Fadl Gulpaygani. I would like to post a response to his work, but much of his apologetic work on behalf of the Faith consists of making spurious attacks on Christianity. It occurred to me that before I can put together a defense, I first have to marshall historical evidence. So the Resources page was born.

It will consist of links to other websites that discuss various aspects of Catholic doctrine and history that are often brought up in Baha'i teaching. So far I have only added links relating to slavery, but many more topics will be added over time.

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NEW TABS

There are two new tabs at the top of the blog. Q & A is for suggesting post topics or asking questions. The guestbook is for comments.

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OFF FOR THE HOLIDAYS

There will be light or no blogging here for the next few weeks. Posting will resume in January.

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ONENESS OF SHEPHERD, ONENESS OF SHEEP

Continuing the theme begun in the last post, I'm responding to this quote from Shoghi Effendi, which represents a very common misconception among Baha'is:

Nowhere in the Gospels do we find any reference to the unity of nations or the unification of mankind as a whole. When Jesus spoke to those around Him, He addressed them primarily as individuals rather than as component parts of one universal, indivisible entity.

Rather than put together a lot of Bible quotes in one post, I'm posting a little bit at a time of passages from throughout the Bible. This post looks at the Gospel of John, chapters 10 and 11. I suggest you read them in their entirety – or better yet, read the entire Gospel. It won't take that long, only a couple of hours. Go ahead; I'll wait.

Done? Okay, let's look at a few verses more closely, starting with chapter 10. This is the Good Shepherd discourse, where he says he is the shepherd and his sheep know his voice.

I am the good shepherd, and I know mine and mine know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father; and I will lay down my life for the sheep. I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. These also I must lead, and they will hear my voice, and there will be one flock, one shepherd.

Notice how he uses the metaphors of the flock and the sheepfold. Christians aren't individual sheep. They are members of something larger – the universal flock. He doesn't just save each sheep one by one. He *gathers* his sheep *together*.

Now look at chapter 11. Jesus has just raised Lazarus from the dead…

Now many of the Jews who had come to Mary and seen what he had done began to believe in him. But some of them went to the Pharisees and told them what Jesus had done. So the chief priests and the Pharisees convened the Sanhedrin and said, "What are we going to do? This man is performing many signs. If we leave him alone, all will believe in him, and the Romans will come and take away both our land and our nation." But one of them, Caiaphas, who was high priest that year, said to them, "You know nothing, nor do you consider that it is better for you that one man should die instead of the people, so that the whole nation may not perish." He did not say this on his own, but since he was high priest for that year, he prophesied that Jesus was going to die for the nation, and not only for the nation, but also to gather into one the dispersed children of God. So from that day on they planned to kill him.

Did you catch that last part? Jesus was going to *gather into one the dispersed children of God*.

'Nuff said.

But just in case it isn't, I'll continue posting passages from the Bible on this theme. One cannot read a single verse in isolation. Just as the various passages of the Bible were written in a larger context, so

must they be read in a larger context. When it comes to the New Testament, you can't really appreciate it unless you have the Old Testament background. You also need the New Testament letters and apocalypse to get a contemporaneous context for what is being said in the Gospels. So this series of posts will look at the whole Bible, since that is the only way to correct Shoghi Effendi's misinformation.

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OVER TEN YEARS LATER…

So it's been a while since I posted on this blog. I don't know if anyone still sees it. I suspect it only gets visited by spambots nowadays. Just in case a real human (even the rare one who might have read the blog in its heyday) drops by, I'll answer a few questions he/she might be wondering:

Why did you stop blogging?

Lack of time, mostly. I also got discouraged at the kinds of comments many of the Baha'i visitors would leave. A lot of Baha'is were thoughtful and intelligent, but quite a few commenters either (a) made comments that clearly ignored what I said in my post, or (b) were ex-Catholic Baha'is who overestimated their own knowledge of Catholicism and consequently argued against strawmen, or (c) would spam massive globs of copy-and-pasted Baha'i Writings in the comment section.

Per (a) above, I must reiterate that not all Baha'i visitors did that. Please don't comment saying that not all Baha'is did that. I literally said that exact thing. Twice now.

But mainly it was lack of time.

Are you still Catholic?

Yes, I'm still a practicing Catholic. I've now been Catholic for twice as long as I was a Baha'i (16 years vs. 8 years).

Have your views of Catholicism changed in the past ten years?

Not really.

Have your views of the Baha'i Faith changed in the past ten years?

I haven't given the Baha'i Faith much thought. During the eight years I was a Baha'i I had accrued a sizeable Baha'i library (as one does). When I became Christian I put it all away in boxes and didn't look at it, except when researching for a post here. I finally gave it all away eight years ago.

So now I was going to no Baha'i meetings and had no Baha'i books to read. Out of sight, out of mind.

I do still have the prayer book the LSA signed and gave me when I declared. But I never look at it. I just feel weird getting rid of it. Seems rude.

Is this blog dead?

I don't know. It has been, obviously. Every once in a while I think about resurrecting it. But it seems like a lot of work. I need to find a new, updated theme for it. I need to go through the comments and do some pruning. I get tired just thinking about it. *[Update 14 November: I have updated the theme, and I've started doing some comment pruning.]*

That said, it's possible I'll write on the blog again. I definitely can't invest much time into it. I'm not even sure it would matter. Would anyone read it if I wrote? Does anyone even read blogs anymore?

Back when I started this blog back in 2006 (has it really been 15

years?) it was with two purposes: (1) For me to think out loud about the transition I had made from Baha'i to Catholic, a transition that had taken two or three years to traverse, and (2) To give me a place to express my frustration at (what seemed to me to be) the inconsistency and even hypocrisy of Baha'is, including the Central Figures, when talking about other religions in general and Catholicism in particular.

These two purposes are no longer motivating for me. I'm used to being Catholic now; the newness has worn off and the Baha'i residue has disappeared from my mind. And since I never talk to Baha'is or read Baha'i literature, I never think anymore about the things they say about Catholicism.

On the other hand, a handful of people have commented that this blog helped them clarify their own thinking about matters of faith. I am grateful that my little scribblings here were helpful to them.

If you read the blog back in the old days, whether you commented or not, whether you were Baha'i or Catholic or neither, thank you for reading, and I pray that God blesses you.

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PAPAL INFALLIBILITY

Here's the Catholic doctrine of papal infallibility in a nutshell: If the pope speaks *ex cathedra* on matters of faith and morals, then what he says is protected from error. Let's break that sentence down:

"If the pope speaks *ex cathedra*…"
Ex cathedra literally means "from the chair", meaning the chair of Peter. This means if the pope speaks in an official capacity as pope. Most of the time the pope is speaking for himself, or in his role as bishop of the diocese of Rome, or in his role (if he has one) as Catholic theologian, and under none of those circumstances would what he said be infallible.

"…on matters of faith and morals…"
That means he's either talking about a doctrinal issue or a moral teaching of the Church. Most of what the pope does, even in his official capacity as pope, involves routine administrative matters like appointing people to various positions, conducting diplomacy with secular governments, meeting and chatting with visitors, and things like that. None of that falls under the protection of infallibility.

"…what he says is protected from error."
The word "infallible" means "without error". It should be distinguished from the word "impeccable" which means "without sin". The Church does not claim that popes are impeccable.

The pope is the chief shepherd of the Church, in that he is chief among the bishops, and serving the Church as pope is a very

demanding and time-consuming calling. But it is only on extremely rare occasions that a pope feels the need to exercise his infallibility, and most popes never do. The last time papal infallibility was exercised was in 1950, and the time before that was in 1854.

If you would like to read more, check out the article on catholic.com, Papal Infallibility. The old Catholic Encyclopedia, available online, has a lengthy article on the Church's Infallibility in general, of which papal infallibility is only a part. If you're a Baha'i who wants to teach Catholics, the Catholic Encyclopedia article is essential reading.

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“PEACE IS NOT MERELY THE ABSENCE OF WAR”

From Gaudium et Spes*, one of the documents of the Second Vatican Council, promulgated in 1965:*

Peace is not merely the absence of war; nor can it be reduced solely to the maintenance of a balance of power between enemies; nor is it brought about by dictatorship. Instead, it is rightly and appropriately called an enterprise of justice. Peace results from that order structured into human society by its divine Founder, and actualized by men as they thirst after ever greater justice. The common good of humanity finds its ultimate meaning in the eternal law. But since the concrete demands of this common good are constantly changing as time goes on, peace is never attained once and for all, but must be built up ceaselessly. Moreover, since the human will is unsteady and wounded by sin, the achievement of peace requires a constant mastering of passions and the vigilance of lawful authority.

But this is not enough. This peace on earth cannot be obtained unless personal well-being is safeguarded and men freely and trustingly share with one another the riches of their inner spirits and their talents. A firm determination to respect other men and peoples and their dignity, as well as the studied practice of brotherhood are absolutely necessary for the establishment of peace. Hence peace is likewise the fruit of love, which goes beyond what justice can provide.

That earthly peace which arises from love of neighbor symbolizes and results from the peace of Christ which radiates from God the Father. For by the cross the incarnate Son, the prince of peace reconciled all men with God. By thus restoring all men to the unity of one people and one body, He slew hatred in His own flesh; and, after being lifted on high by His resurrection, He poured forth the spirit of love into the hearts of men.

For this reason, all Christians are urgently summoned to do in love what the truth requires, and to join with all true peacemakers in pleading for peace and bringing it about.

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PROGRESSIVE UNIFICATIONS?

I have a question about this passage in *The Promised Day Is Come*, pages 117-118:

> This will indeed be the fitting climax of that process of integration which, starting with the family, the smallest unit in the scale of human organization, must, after having called successively into being the tribe, the city-state, and the nation, continue to operate until it culminates in the unification of the whole world, the final object and the crowning glory of human evolution on this planet.

Does each specific stage correspond exactly to a specific Manifestation? Did one Manifestation bring about the unification of families, and a later one of tribes, and so on? And if so, which Manifestation is responsible for which stage?

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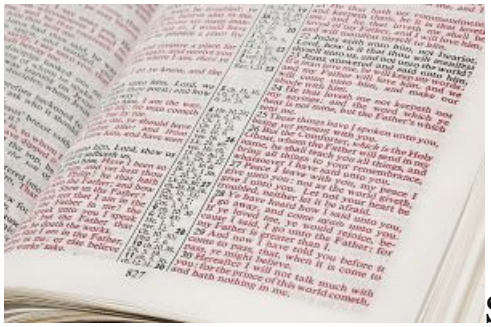
RED-LETTER CHRISTIANS



Some editions of the Bible print the words of Christ in red so that they stand out from the rest of the text. This has lent a nickname to Christians who make a common doctrinal mistake. A red-letter Christian is someone who believes that the only parts of the Bible that really matter are the direct quotations of Christ. There are a couple reasons I think this is a mistake.

First, it's naive. The authors of the Gospels made decisions about what quotes to include and what to exclude. So if you base your faith on the red letters, you aren't reading Christ's words straight. You're reading the Gospel writers' versions of what Christ said.

Second, it takes Christ's words out of context. Christ wasn't speaking into a vacuum. He was forming a community (the Church) and speaking to it. The community heard what he said and created the New Testament based on it.

Some Christians think you can get rid of the Church and just read the Bible, and that makes for a simpler, purer Christianity. But that's backwards. Jesus didn't write the New Testament, upon which the Church was later based. Jesus created the Church, which then wrote the New Testament.

If you are interested in learning more about what Catholics believe

about the Bible, a good place to start is this section from the Catechism of the Catholic Church.

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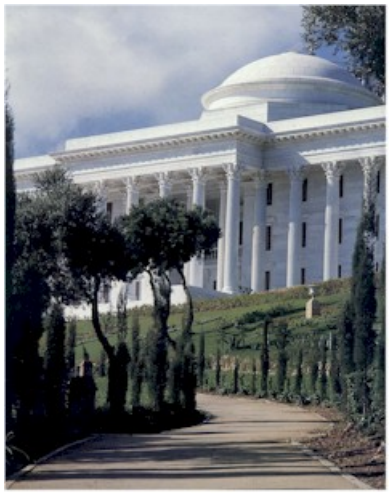
RELIGIOUS PREJUDICE IN THELETTER TO THE WORLD'S RELIGIOUS LEADERS

In the past two posts on the *Letter to the World's Religious Leaders*, I looked closely at sentences from the first two paragraphs. Now I'd like to consider one of the larger themes of the document.



In paragraphs 3-6, the Universal House of Justice notes that society has made great progress in overcoming prejudice based on gender, nation, race and ethnicity. It goes on to put religious prejudice in the same category as these other prejudices. At first glance this seems reasonable. After all, there's no justification in bearing prejudice against someone just because they follow a religion.

But look at how the Universal House of Justice defines religious prejudice. It doesn't spell it out, but you can see it in the overall thrust of the document. In paragraph 9, the UHJ suggests that to have religious prejudice is to deny "that all of the world's great religions are equally valid in nature and origin." In paragraph 10, the UHJ says that most organized religion is holding up progress in

achieving the oneness of mankind because it is gripped by "dogmas and claims of privileged access to truth." In other words, the faithful believers in the world's religions are obtructing progress because they believe their own religions' truth claims.

In paragraphs 11-16, the Universal House of Justice's argument goes like this: Claims that one religion is more true than another have caused horrific warfare and have stifled the life of the mind. Note (the UHJ says), we're not saying *religion* causes these things. Religion has inspired people to love and forgive, and has been the impetus for every advance in civilization. Rather, what causes these things is the belief that one religion is more true than another. Thus, the way to solve this problem is for everyone to concede that one religion is just as good as another. When people do that, then followers of different religions will finally get along, and spiritual life can finally flourish unhindered.

This is not reasonable. The Universal House of Justice is making a number of assumptions in this line of reasoning that it is not justifying. It doesn't justify them, and there's no reason why we should take these assumptions for granted.

1. It assumes that religious wars occurred because people made exclusive truth claims. Is that really true?

2. It assumes that claims to exclusive truth hinder intellectual activity. Should we take this idea for granted? There's also a double standard here, because to assert that all religions come from God is *an exclusive truth claim*, excluding all possible interpretations of a religion that don't allow for this dogma.

3. The UHJ says religion "has awakened in whole populations capacities to love, to forgive, to create, to dare greatly, to overcome prejudice, to sacrifice for the common good and to discipline the impulses of animal instinct" (paragraph 13). What is religion? What is this common *thing* we call religion, that is doing all this motivating among the various religious adherents of the world? The UHJ doesn't say. I'm left wondering if religion is supposed to be nothing more than a vague spirituality. How a vague spirituality could motivate someone to make sacrifices and discipline their animal impulses is beyond me.

4. It goes on to say, "it would be difficult to think of any fundamental advance in civilization that did not derive its moral thrust from" religion (paragraph 14). What does the House of Justice mean by "civilization"? What does it mean by "advance"? And how exactly has religion done the thrusting? It might seem like I'm being nit-picky, but we need to think about these things. This is a seductive argument. If religion has advanced civilization throughout the world, then there must be some common denominator underlying all religions. This argument is seductive, that is, until you realize there's no substance to it. The words "advance" and "civilization" are not referring to anything real.

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RESURRECTION PIE

In a comment on my previous post, Michael suggested a possible reconciliation of the Baha'i and Christian understandings of the Resurrection of Christ. He suggests that after Jesus died, he still had the power to show himself to people in a physical form. So all the resurrection appearances in the Gospels can be understood as the bodyless Christ materializing a body in order to meet a need in a given time and place, like proving to the disciples that he was still alive in the spirit, and at the same time not just a ghost.

For Christians, what's important is that Jesus rose in the flesh, that his spirit and body were joined at the Resurrection for all eternity. This is a fundamental verity of Christianity. The stories in the New Testament are simply meant to illustrate this truth.

If you present a different definition of the Resurrection, one that rejects the Christian teaching that Jesus rose in the flesh, then you're replacing our belief with yours. Saying that Jesus was a spirit projecting a physical form temporarily is not the same thing as saying he rose again in the flesh.

What's more, there appears to be an underlying assumption that what Christians really care about is the text of the Bible, the *words* of the Bible. So the way to teach Christians is to show them how the words of the Bible can be reinterpreted to corroborate the Baha'i teachings. But this is not how Christians' faith works at all, and I think it results in Baha'is not understanding where Christians are coming from.

Let me try to give an analogy. Let's say you really like apple pie. Your friend tells you he's baking you an apple pie for your birthday, and you get really excited. Then you take a bite, and there aren't any apples. You're like, "What's the deal?" He says, "Oh, I thought I'd put a new twist on my apple pie recipe. I used peaches instead of apples."

This is what you're doing in your attempt to reconcile our religions. You take out the Christian filling and replace it with Baha'i filling.

What makes an apple pie "apple pie" is not whether you *call* it apple pie. It's whether there are apples in it. Likewise, what makes the Resurrection of Christ a "resurrection" is whether the body comes back to life.

You see, Baha'is are missing the point when they redefine the Resurrection of Christ. They keep the word, but they give it a new meaning, and this is supposed to reconcile the religions. As if all the non-Baha'is in the world believe in words instead of meanings. Christians believe in the *meaning* of the Resurrection: Christ rose – body and spirit – and by joining ourselves to him, we participate in his eternal life – body and spirit.

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“SAMOA E FA’AMALO LE FA’AALOALO.”

The following is an address from Pope Paul VI to his highness Malietoa Tanumafili II on the occasion of the pope’s visit to Samoa on 30 November 1970:

Your Highness,

We are delighted to reply to your so gracious greeting, and to express our fervent best wishes to Your Highness and to all the authorities of the island.

We are truly happy to have been able to have this meeting with you and we thank God for it! Our wish in undertaking this long journey is to bring you the witness of our fatherly affection and to express our desire for your peace and well-being. We greet all who have come here: men and women, the young and the old.

We greet especially our brothers in the faith, the sons and daughters of the Catholic Church. If you are so pleased to see the Pope, rest assured that we too are very happy. The Lord permits us to become for a few hours a true missionary – as was Saint Peter whose lowly successor we are; our office as father of all the faithful demands this of us. May this meeting strengthen your faith and increase your love, the sign by which the true disciples of Jesus Christ are recognized.

May God bless you all. Samoa e fa’amalo le fa’aaloalo.

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SHAME IS GOOD FOR YOU

Phillipe has an excellent post on moral excellence and the value of shame.

> To be human is to mess up. Otherwise we would be God (personally I don't want the job). It is our effort to learn, to grow and to progress in a conscious fashion in spite of ourselves that is what moral and spiritual development is all about. Take that away and where would we be? Pretty bored and stunted in our development. One of the mysteries of life is that God makes use of imperfect instruments like ourselves to achieve His will in the world. It will never cease to amaze me.

and

> God guides and blesses us according to our effort, rather than a particular outcome. Outcomes are ultimately the fruit of the dynamic interplay of human striving and divine assistance. It's the striving that really counts. Personally, I'd rather be part of a community of imperfect people striving to be their best, than people who've already attained perfection (or at least think they have!).

Good stuff.

Sometimes I lament that our society has rejected shame and guilt. But I don't think that's right. Everyone still has a strong sense of shame. The difference is that many people, what you might call social or moral liberals, have a different value system so they place

their shame in other areas. Sexual immorality is not shameful to them. But other things, like throwing a recycleable in the trash, can induce intense feelings of guilt.

Not that that's bad. I recycle. I'm just saying, a sense of shame is normal. If you get the wrong spiritual training, though (like what folks get in our culture), your sense of shame can be warped, and you'll become numb and even approving of things for which you ought to feel shame.

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SHOGHI EFFENDI AND CHRISTIAN AUTHORITY

This is the second in a series on Shoghi Effendi's comments in *The World Order of Baha'u'llah*. In this series we are exploring yet another facet of the Baha'i Faith's misplaced superiority complex. In this case, Shoghi Effendi insists that the Baha'i Faith is superior to Christianity and Islam because the Baha'i Writings explicitly spell out how the Baha'i administration should be put together.

> He [Baha'u'llah] has not merely enunciated certain universal principles, or propounded a particular philosophy, however potent, sound and universal these may be. In addition to these He, as well as 'Abdu'l-Bahá after Him, has, unlike the Dispensations of the past, clearly and specifically laid down a set of Laws, established definite institutions, and provided for the essentials of a Divine Economy. ...
>
> Not only have they revealed all the directions required for the practical realization of those ideals which the Prophets of God have visualized, and which from time immemorial have inflamed the imagination of seers and poets in every age. They have also, in unequivocal and emphatic language, appointed those twin institutions of the House of Justice and of the Guardianship as their chosen Successors, destined to apply the principles, promulgate the laws, protect the institutions, adapt loyally and intelligently the Faith to the requirements of progressive society, and consummate the incorruptible inheritance which the

Founders of the Faith have bequeathed to the world.

> Should we look back upon the past, were we to search out the Gospel and the Qur'án, we will readily recognize that neither the Christian nor the Islamic Dispensations can offer a parallel either to the system of Divine Economy so thoroughly established by Bahá'u'lláh, or to the safeguards which He has provided for its preservation and advancement. (WOB 19-20)

I hope Shoghi Effendi doesn't think all Jesus Christ did was "merely enunciate certain universal principles," because he didn't. But that's another post. More to the point, Shoghi Effendi misunderstands the purpose of the Bible. I discussed this in the previous post on this topic, but I should make one more point in that regard.

It is important to understand that the Bible is a witness to the establishment of the kingdom of God. It doesn't contain specific prescriptions for the Christian hierarchy (again, that's not what the Bible's for), but the Bible does, as a witness of events, give glimpses of that hierarchy being established.

It is clear that Jesus intended for there to be an organized church that would act in his name and be led by a designated authority. Speaking to his disciples, he said,

> Moreover if your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault between you and him alone. If he hears you, you have gained your brother. But if he will not hear you, take with you one or two more, that 'by the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established' [Deut. 19:15]. And

> if he refuses to hear them, tell it to the church. But if he refuses even to hear the church, let him be to you like a heathen and a tax collector. Assuredly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. (Matthew 18:15-18)

So not only does Jesus anticipate the establishment of the Church, but he gives his disciples the authority to expell people from it. Earlier, when speaking to the apostle Simon he said,

> And I also say to you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it. And I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. (Matthew 16:18-19)

So while the Gospels don't spell out how the authority of the Church will be structured, they assume such an authority will exist. This authority is not given to just any old Christian. Not all disciples exercise the power of binding and loosing. It's given to specific individuals within the Church who are publicly recognized as holding this authority.

After the resurrection, when Jesus appeared to the apostles in Jerusalem, he finally grants them this authority that he had promised them:

> Then Jesus said to them again, "Peace to you! As the Father has sent Me, so I send you." And when He had said this, He

> breathed on them, and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.” (John 20:21-23)

What is Jesus’ legacy? Is it a detailed set of regulations? Clearly not. But look at what his legacy *is*:

> And being assembled together with them, he commanded them not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait for the promise of the Father, “which,” he said, “you have heard from me; for John truly baptized with water, but you shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now.”
>
> Therefore, when they had come together, they asked him, “Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?” And he said to them, “it is not for you to know times or seasons which the Father has put in his own authority. But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be witnesses to me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.” (Acts 1:4-8)

When a charismatic, innovative thinker founds a new movement, he takes care to delineate for his followers exactly how the movement should be run after his death. Jesus is different. He doesn’t go into much detail. He tells them, “You’ll receive the Holy Spirit, and he’ll guide you into all truth.” Far from being a weakness, as Shoghi Effendi claims, this is a strength of Christianity’s claim. Jesus didn’t rely on human power for the success of his movement. (And creating a detailed administrative code would be exactly that.) He left everything to God, literally – by leaving the movement to God

the Holy Spirit.

Shoghi Effendi demonstrates a fundamental stumbling block for Baha'is. Baha'is assume that a religion is ultimately summed up in its text. While the Manifestation is bodily present, he can convey God's commandments orally and answer questions. In his absence, his followers have no choice but to rely on his teachings in written form.

Notice what Baha'i spirituality consists of: reading the Writings. Period. If you have a doctrinal question, you read the Writings. When you pray, you read the Writings. Even group worship consists of sitting in a circle and reading the Writings. If you want to mix things up a bit, you'll listen to the Writings set to music or recited in another language.

There's nothing wrong with that. If that's how your religion works then so be it. I just want to highlight that in other religions, *that is not normal.* And to assume that other religions work that way is wrong. Case in point: Christianity.

Shoghi Effendi claims that the Baha'i Faith is superior to Christianity because its Writings contain more administrative detail. From a Christian point of view, his assertion is irrelevant.

Getting back to the Bible, in the Acts of the Apostles and in some of the letters we can see the hierarchy, the Christian administrative order if you will, continuing after the Ascension.

> There was not a needy person among them, for as many as were possessors of lands or houses sold them, and brought

> the proceeds of what was sold and laid it at the apostles' feet; and distribution was made to each as any had need. Thus Joseph who was surnamed by the apostles Barnabas (which means, Son of encouragement), a Levite, a native of Cyprus, sold a field which belonged to him, and brought the money and laid it at the apostles' feet. (Acts 4:34-37)

So the Bible doesn't prescribe "when Christians share their possessions, the common property will be administered by the apostles." Like I said, rather than giving a set of regulations, it witnesses the formation of the hierarchy. Moreover, the apostles didn't claim the right to hold this authority because of a quote from Jesus written somewhere. Their authority is not based on a text. It is handed on directly from the Lord.

They also hand their authority on to others. See for example Paul's letter to Titus:

> For this reason I left you in Crete so that you might set right what remains to be done and appoint presbyters in every town, as I directed you…" (Titus 1:5)

Let's close with a look at Acts 15. At the beginning of the chapter, a controversy arises in Antioch over a doctrinal question:

> Some who had come down from Judea were instructing the brothers, "Unless you are circumcised according to the Mosaic practice, you cannot be saved." Because there arose no little dissension and debate by Paul and Barnabas with them, it was decided that Paul, Barnabas, and some of the others should go up to Jerusalem to the apostles and

> presbyters about this question. (Acts 15:1-2)

So again, the Bible witnesses to the fact that the Church operated with a recognized authority. They went to Jerusalem, and the apostles and presbyters had a long discussion of the matter. Some of the Christians were on one side, some on the other. Then the apostles Peter and James spoke before the assembly, and they reached a decision and drafted a letter. There are a a few things to highlight about the letter:

1) In order to make statements about Christian doctrine you have to have authorization from the rightful leaders:

> Since we have heard that some of our number who went out without any mandate from us have upset you with their teachings and disturbed your peace of mind… (Acts 15:24)

(In another English translation it is rendered, "…some went out from us without our authorization…".)

2) The Holy Spirit was involved; it was not just a human decision:

> It is the decision of the Holy Spirit and of us not to place on you any burden beyond these necessities… (Acts 15:28)

3) The decision was reached not by looking for an answer in the Hebrew scriptures (they gave no clear answer, anyway). It was by taking their understanding of the principles of the Gospel, gathered from their knowledge of the scriptures and the light of their own experience with God, coupled with the guidance of the Holy Spirit, that they were led to their decision. And this is how the Church continues to make decisions.

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SOCIAL LAWS AND SPIRITUAL LAWS

Baha'is often think that progressive revelation is easily demonstrable to a Christian. Simply point out that Christ abrogated many of the laws of Moses. If God's law could be abrogated once, why not multiple times? Especially since the world keeps changing.

Deepened Christians will not find this argument compelling. In order to understand why, one must understand the different ways that Baha'is and Christians understand God's purpose in revealing laws.

For Baha'is, there are two kinds of laws: spiritual and social. Spiritual laws, such as the necessity of prayer and fasting, remain constant from one dispensation to the next. Social laws, on the other hand, are not constant. They are tailored to the needs of each age, and can change for each new dispensation depending on what the new problems are.

By contrast, Christianity does not distinguish between spiritual and social laws in the Bible. Rather, it distinguishes between laws that prepared mankind for the coming of Christ, and laws that logically follow from God's nature as revealed in Christ.

We do have social laws in Christianity, but they are not mandated by scripture. For example, fasting is a necessary part of living a Christian life. But the regulations of fasting may be set by the Church to suit the needs of a given culture, and therefore change over time. We don't need a revelation from God to set new rules.

The Church, in her role as shepherd of the faithful, can set new rules if they are necessary, and can even tailor those rules to the needs of a particular culture. Thus, the rules for fasting are slightly different in the U.S. than they are in other parts of the world.

Let's take divorce for instance. Moses allowed divorce and Christ prohibited it. Seemingly a classic case of a social law. But look more closely. The Mosaic law of divorce is summarized in Deuteronomy 22 and 24. Note that scripture does not institute divorce. Rather, it recognizes that divorce exists and seeks to regulate it.

Then when Jesus came he had this exchange with the Pharisees:

> The Pharisees approached and asked, "Is it lawful for a husband to divorce his wife?" They were testing him.
>
> He said to them in reply, "What did Moses command you?" They replied, "Moses permitted him to write a bill of divorce and dismiss her."
>
> But Jesus told them, "Because of the hardness of your hearts he wrote you this commandment. But from the beginning of creation, 'God made them male and female. For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother (and be joined to his wife), and the two shall become one flesh.' So they are no longer two but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, no human being must separate."
>
> In the house the disciples again questioned him about this. He said to them, "Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her; and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery."

(Mark 10:2-12)

This is not a social law designed for 1st-century Palestine. This is a statement about what is natural to us as human beings.

Jesus' attitude toward divorce is different from Baha'u'llah's. For Baha'u'llah, the phenomenon of divorce is in itself morally neutral. It is either appropriate or inappropriate purely on pragmatic grounds – what will best serve the social issues of the time. For Christ, divorce is fundamentally unnatural, always and everywhere. Moses merely permitted divorce to exist, "but from the beginning of creation, God made them male and female, and the two shall become one flesh."

Other places where Christ talks about divorce are Matthew 5 (in the Sermon on the Mount), Matthew 19, and Luke 16.

As I said above, laws in the Bible either prepare for the coming of Christ or logically follow from God's nature as revealed in Christ. The laws of Moses regulating divorce prepared Israel by restricting divorce under certain circumstances. But the Old Testament also condemns divorce as evil. In several places, God explains that just as marriage is meant to be permanent, so the relationship between God and his people is meant to be permanent.

> Judah has broken faith; an abominable thing has been done in Israel and in Jerusalem. Judah has profaned the temple which the LORD loves, and has married an idolatrous woman. May the LORD cut off from the man who does this both witness and advocate out of the tents of Jacob, and anyone to offer sacrifice to the LORD of hosts!

> This also you do: the altar of the LORD you cover with tears, weeping and groaning, because he no longer regards your sacrifice nor accepts it favorably from your hand. And you say, “Why is it?”
>
> Because the LORD is witness between you and the wife of your youth, with whom you have broken faith though she is your companion, your betrothed wife. Did he not make one being, with flesh and spirit: and what does that one require but godly offspring? You must then safeguard life that is your own, and not break faith with the wife of your youth.
>
> For I hate divorce, says the LORD, the God of Israel, and covering one’s garment with injustice, says the LORD of hosts. You must then safeguard life that is your own, and not break faith. (Malachi 2:11-16)

If you must use the spiritual-law/social-law distinction, then in Christianity, the prohibition of divorce is a spiritual law. It logically follows from the nature of God and from our nature, and is therefore eternal.

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ST. MARTIN'S DAY

Today is the feast day of St. Martin of Tours (316-397). He was a soldier in the Roman army, but after his baptism he refused to engage in combat. "I am a soldier of Christ," he said, "and it is not permissible for me to fight."

An auspicious day for the beginning of this blog.

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TEACHING CHRISTIANS ABOUT CHRISTIANITY

To resume discussion of the *Letter to the World's Religious Leaders*, The Universal House of Justice quotes Baha'u'llah (paragraph 15):

> There can be no doubt whatever that the peoples of the world, of whatever race or religion, derive their inspiration from one heavenly Source, and are the subjects of one God. The difference between the ordinances under which they abide should be attributed to the varying requirements and exigencies of the age in which they were revealed. All of them, except a few which are the outcome of human perversity, were ordained of God, and are a reflection of His Will and Purpose. Arise and, armed with the power of faith, shatter to pieces the gods of your vain imaginings, the sowers of dissension amongst you. Cleave unto that which draweth you together and uniteth you.

The House goes on to say,

> Such an appeal does not call for abandonment of faith in the fundamental verities of any of the world's great belief systems.

What are the "fundamental verities" of each religion? How do we know what they are?

If you were to ask a bunch of Christians what the fundamentals of Christianity are, you'd get a lot of answers. But almost all of them would revolve around three essential points: the Incarnation (when God became a human being), the Crucifixion (when Christ died for our sins), and the Resurrection (when Christ rose bodily from the dead). You might call these the Three Pillars of Christianity. Protestant, Catholic and Orthodox Christians all agree on these fundamentals.

All three of these fundamentals are denied by the Baha'i Faith.

So what does the Universal House of Justice mean when it says, "Such an appeal does not call for abandonment of faith in the fundamental verities of any of the world's great belief systems"? How can it say that when it (and all Baha'is) call for Christians to abandon three of the most fundamental verities of their faith?

Easy. It redefines the fundamental verities. It tells Christians, "you've got Christianity all wrong. Let us educate you about Christianity." Take this excerpt for example, from a letter dated May 28, 1984:

> Concerning the Resurrection of Christ you quote the twenty-fourth chapter of the Gospel of St. Luke, where the account stresses the reality of the appearance of Jesus to His disciples who, the Gospel states, at first took Him to be a ghost. From a Baha'i point of view the belief that the Resurrection was the return to life of a body of flesh and

> blood, which later rose from the earth into the sky is not reasonable, nor is it necessary to the essential truth of the disciples' experience, which is that Jesus did not cease to exist when He was crucified (as would have been the belief of many Jews of that period), but that His Spirit, released from the body, ascended to the presence of God and continued to inspire and guide His followers and preside over the destinies of His dispensation.

The Universal House of Justice says the Christian belief about the Resurrection is "not reasonable." Are the Christians who believe it also unreasonable? It's as if Christians are blockheads, while Baha'is are smart enough to know that no reasonable person would believe such a silly tale. I thought Baha'is wanted to promote religious understanding, not flippantly dismiss others' beliefs.

And why, by the way, is the Christian belief unreasonable? Is it unreasonable for God to bring bodies back to life? Why? Is he not powerful enough? No, it couldn't be that. He is Almighty, after all. Or is it that he's too sophisticated? Maybe bodily resurrection is something that would only appeal to those rubes in the trailer park who watch TBN. Spiritual resurrection is so much more refined. Naturally God is nice and bourgeois, like me.

Moreover, the Universal House of Justice's objection that it's "not reasonable" would seem to fly in the face of their own faith. Consider what Baha'u'llah says in his tablet *Ishraqat*:

> O thou who hast fixed thy gaze upon the Dawning-Place of

> the Cause of God! Know thou for a certainty that the Will of God is not limited by the standards of the people, and God doth not tread in their ways.

So according to Baha'u'llah, God can do whatever he pleases, regardless of whether we think it's reasonable.The Universal House of Justice goes on to say that not only is a bodily resurrection not reasonable, but it is also not "necessary to the essential truth of the disciples' experience."

Says who? The disciples themselves report a physical resurrection, and seemed to think it was important. Later generations of Christians also felt that way. But apparently we've all been wrong this whole time. Luckily for us, the Baha'is are on hand to tell us what the essential truth of their experience really was:

> Jesus did not cease to exist when He was crucified (as would have been the belief of many Jews of that period), but that His Spirit, released from the body, ascended to the presence of God and continued to inspire and guide His followers and preside over the destinies of His dispensation.

So the unity of religions Baha'is talk about only exists because Baha'is redefine what other religions teach. They dismiss what the believers themselves regard as the fundamental verities of their religion. The substitute them with new fundamental verities, while dismissing the real ones as "not reasonable." Anyone who talks to Christians this way is simply being patronizing. Remind me again how this promotes world peace?

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THE BBC'S ANTI-CHRISTIAN BIAS

From the *Daily Mail*:

> BBC executives have been forced to admit what critics have known for years – that the corporation is institutionally biased. ...
>
> Senior figures admitted that the BBC is guilty of promoting Left-wing views and an anti-Christian sentiment.

Read more about it:

We are biased, admit the stars of BBC News

Yes, we are biased on religion and politics, admit BBC executives

(h/t Shrine of the Holy Whapping)

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THE CATHOLIC VIEW ON ALCOHOL AND DRUGS

An anonymous visitor asked this in the Q&A section of this blog:

> Hi, I am a Baha'i who would like to know some more about Catholicism. The Baha'i Faith has clear, strongly worded teachings against alcohol, psychoactive drugs and tobacco. I'm not aware of Catholics having any code of conduct in these areas. If I'm wrong about that, can you please quote Bible and Catholic teachings on these subjects, so that I can quote those teachings to my Catholic friends to help them to improve themselves.

Unfortunately most members of the Catholic Church neither know nor care what the Church teaches. The Church is a "big tent" that includes many people whose Catholic identity is no more than an extension of their family or ethnic identity. So what the Church says may or may not matter to your friends.

There are many references to alcohol in the Bible, mostly wine. The upshot of it all is that wine is okay to consume in moderation, but one must never become drunk.

I'm not aware of the Bible saying anything about psychoactive drugs, and tobacco was not yet in use when the Bible was written.

As you probably know, the Catholic Church does not base its teachings solely on what is written in the Bible. We believe that God entrusted the Church to the ongoing presence of the Holy Spirit,

which protects it from teaching error and allows it to apply the principles of truth to new circumstances as societies change.

We understand there to be seven fundamental virtues, upon which all virtues are based. Three have to do with God and our relationship with him (faith, hope and love), which we know about only through revelation. The other four (prudence, justice, fortitude and temperance) are earthly virtues accessible to all mankind through reason.

We believe that to indulge in alcohol, tobacco or drugs in a way that causes harm to one's body transgresses the virtue of temperance. (Temperance is the virtue of moderation in all things.)

We also believe that the Ten Commandments are actually categories of sins, and every possible sin falls into one of these ten categories. Harming one's health is a violation of the Fifth Commandment, "Thou shalt not kill".

If you need a reference, see the Catechism of the Catholic Church, paragraphs 2288–2291. (The Catechism's section on the Fifth Commandment may be found online on the U.S. bishops' website and on the Vatican website.)

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THE FAITH ON THE RADIO

George Wesley at *Baha'i Views* has a post about song lyrics, and how every song can sound like it's about Baha'u'llah. That was certainly true of me when I was Baha'i.

I remember especially the summer of 1998 when Semisonic's "Closing Time" was a big hit. It'd come on the radio as I drove home from a fireside or from Feast, and I'd sing along and think about Baha'u'llah.

Closing time
Open all the doors and let you out into the world
Closing time
Turn all of the lights on over every boy and every girl

Naturally this is about the new dispensation ushered in by the Twin Manifestations, opening the doors of knowledge and emblazoning the light of divine illumination.

Closing time
One last call for alcohol so finish your whiskey or beer
Closing time
You don't have to go home but you can't stay here

"You can't stay here," Baha'u'llah says, "in the old mindset. You have to leave that behind and embrace the new Day that's dawning."

I know who I want to take me home
I know who I want to take me home
I know who I want to take me home

Baha’u’llah, that’s who.

Thanks for bringing back some old memories, Mr. Wesley.

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“THE HOLY SPIRIT IS THE SOURCE OF BOTH UNITY AND DIVERSITY”

from a homily by Pope John Paul II, given in 1987:

This unity does not at all erase diversity. On the contrary, it develops it. There is constantly “unity in diversity.” Through the work of the one Lord, by means of the one faith and the one baptism, this diversity – a diversity of human persons, of individuals – tends toward unity, a unity which is communion in the likeness of God the Trinity.

The unity of the Body of Christ gives life; at the same time, it serves diversity and develops it. This is the diversity of “everyone” and at the same time of “each one.” It is the truth that we finding the letter to the Ephesians, where Paul writes: “Each of us has received God’s favor in the measure in which Christ bestows it. . . . It is he who gave apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers in roles of service for the faithful to build up the body of Christ” (Eph. 4:7, 11-12). As such then it is the Holy Spirit who is the source of both the unity and diversity in the Church: the unity because it finds its origin solely in the spirit; the diversity since the Spirit bestows the variety of gifts, the variety of vocations and ministries found in the Church, which is the Body of Christ and at the same time the People of God.

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“THE INDIANS SHOULD NOT BE IN ANY WAY ENSLAVED”

The following is the full text of the encyclical Sublimus Dei*, issued by Pope Paul III on May 29, 1537. In it he condemns the enslavement of the natives of America, declares any act of enslavement null and void, and says the notion that they are not fully human is inspired by the devil.*

Pope Paul III

Paul III Pope. To all faithful Christians to whom this writing may come, health in Christ our Lord and the apostolic benediction.

The sublime God so loved the human race that He created man in such wise that he might participate, not only in the good that other creatures enjoy, but endowed him with capacity to attain to the inaccessible and invisible Supreme Good and behold it face to face; and since man, according to the testimony of the sacred scriptures, has been created to enjoy eternal life and happiness, which none may obtain save through faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, it is necessary that he should possess the nature and faculties enabling him to receive that faith; and that whoever is thus endowed should be capable of receiving that same faith. Nor is it credible that any one should possess so little understanding as to desire the faith and

yet be destitute of the most necessary faculty to enable him to receive it. Hence Christ, who is the Truth itself, that has never failed and can never fail, said to the preachers of the faith whom He chose for that office 'Go ye and teach all nations.' He said all, without exception, for all are capable of receiving the doctrines of the faith.

The enemy of the human race, who opposes all good deeds in order to bring men to destruction, beholding and envying this, invented a means never before heard of, by which he might hinder the preaching of God's word of Salvation to the people: he inspired his satellites who, to please him, have not hesitated to publish abroad that the Indians of the West and the South, and other people of whom We have recent knowledge should be treated as dumb brutes created for our service, pretending that they are incapable of receiving the Catholic Faith.

Columbus landing on Hispaniola

We, who, though unworthy, exercise on earth the power of our Lord and seek with all our might to bring those sheep of His flock who are outside into the fold committed to our charge, consider, however, that the Indians are truly men and that they are not only capable of understanding the Catholic Faith but, according to our information,

they desire exceedingly to receive it. Desiring to provide ample remedy for these evils, We define and declare by these Our letters, or by any translation thereof signed by any notary public and sealed with the seal of any ecclesiastical dignitary, to which the same credit shall be given as to the originals, that, notwithstanding whatever may have been or may be said to the contrary, the said Indians and all other people who may later be discovered by Christians, are by no means to be deprived of their liberty or the possession of their property, even though they be outside the faith of Jesus Christ; and that they may and should, freely and legitimately, enjoy their liberty and the possession of their property; nor should they be in any way enslaved; should the contrary happen, it shall be null and have no effect.

By virtue of Our apostolic authority We define and declare by these present letters, or by any translation thereof signed by any notary public and sealed with the seal of any ecclesiastical dignitary, which shall thus command the same obedience as the originals, that the said Indians and other peoples should be converted to the faith of Jesus Christ by preaching the word of God and by the example of good and holy living.

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THE MARTYRS OF CHINA

St. Augustine Zhao Rong and companions, martyrs

July 9 in the Baha'i Faith is the commemoration of the Martyrdom of the Bab. In the Catholic Church, July 9 is the feast day commemorating the Martyrs of China.

There have been Christians in China for about 1,400 years, but it has always been a small minority. Today there are 70 million Christians in China, about 5 percent of the country's population. Periodically over the centuries the Chinese government has persecuted the Christian minority, a state of affairs that has continued in modern times. 120 of these martyrs have been canonized as saints, and July 9 is their collective feast day. These 120 martyrs were killed over a span of time from the 1600s through the early twentieth century.

One of the most famous of these martyrs is a convert named Zhao Rong. He was a soldier in the Chinese army at the beginning of the

nineteenth century, when the emperor instigated a new wave of persecutions. One day Zhao Rong was assigned to accompany a French missionary to the place of execution. When the missionary refused to recant his faith in Christ and chose death instead, Zhao Rong realized that though the missionary outwardly seemed weak, in reality he displayed more strength than a soldier. He converted and took the name Augustine, and was later ordained a priest. He was martyred in 1815.

A large number of Christians were killed during the Boxer Rebellion in 1900. Among them was a young man named Chi Zhuzi, 18 years old. They skinned him alive but he refused to deny Christ. Then they cut off his right arm and he cried, "Every piece of my flesh, every drop of my blood will tell you I'm a Christian!"

There is more information about the Chinese martyrs on the Vatican website here.

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THE POPE ON INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE

The following is an excerpt from the pope's address yesterday to Bangladesh's bishops. Seven bishops lead the 300,000 Catholics of Bangladesh.

The Church is Catholic: a community embracing peoples of all races and languages, and not limited to any one culture or particular social, economic or political system. She is at the service of the entire human family, freely sharing her gifts for the well-being of all. This gives her a connatural ability to foster unity and peace. My dear brothers, you and your people, as promoters of harmony and peace, have much to offer the nation. In your love for your country you inspire tolerance, moderation and understanding. By encouraging people who share important values to cooperate for the common good, you help to consolidate your country's stability and to maintain it for the future. These efforts, however subtle, give effective support to the majority of your fellow citizens who uphold the country's noble tradition of mutual respect, tolerance and social harmony. May you likewise continue to sustain and counsel Catholic lay people and all who wish to offer their service for the good of society in public office, social communications, in education, healthcare and social assistance. May they always rejoice in the knowledge that Christ accepts as a gesture of personal love whatever good is done to the least of his brothers.

I am aware of recent initiatives you have taken in the field of interreligious dialogue, and I exhort you to persevere with patient

dedication to this essential component of the Church's mission *ad gentes*. Indeed, much good can be accomplished when it is conducted in a spirit of mutual understanding and collaboration in truth and freedom. All men and women have an obligation to seek the truth. When it is found, they are compelled to model their entire lives in accordance with its demands. Consequently, the most important contribution we can bring to interreligious dialogue is our knowledge of Jesus of Nazareth, "the way, the truth and the life". Dialogue, based on mutual respect and truth, cannot fail to have a positive influence on the social climate of your country. The delicacy of this task requires thorough preparation of clergy and lay people, first of all by offering them a deeper knowledge of their own faith and then by helping them to grow in their understanding of Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism and the other religions present in your region.

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THE BLOG IS STILL RUNNING

Compared to the other things I do in life, I have always given this blog a low priority. In recent months I've given it even less attention than the meagre amount I had previously. But I just want to jot a quick note to let folks know the blog is still operational. So if you post a comment and I don't respond to it soon (or at all), it isn't you. I just don't spend much time here.

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THE BODY AND HOMOSEXUALITY, PART 1

Many Baha'is may wonder why Christians make such a big deal about the physical resurrection. It may seem irrelevant to what really matters in religion – worshipping God and serving others. The Baha'i explanation, that it was a spiritual event, may seem more applicable to us today, since we can experience the same spiritual resurrection in our own lives.

I'd like to take a moment to give a concrete example of how the physical resurrection is an integral and necessary component of our faith and practice as Christians. I'll use the example of homosexuality.

Both the Baha'i Faith and the Catholic Church forbid homosexual behavior as morally wrong. We also both insist that we must love the person who has an inclination to commit homosexual behavior. In other words, we love the person but we condemn the act. So in this respect Baha'is and Catholics are in complete agreement.

What is interesting is that we come to this agreement from very different directions. It appears, in other words, that the philosophical underpinning for our positions is different.

In recently rereading the Baha'i compilation *Homosexuality* I found several themes, and I'd like to call attention to a couple of them.

One theme is that homosexual behavior is against our nature. This is found in several quotes from Shoghi Effendi, such as this one:

> No matter how devoted and fine the love may be between people of the same sex, to let it find expression in sexual acts is wrong. To say that it is ideal is no excuse. Immorality of every sort is really forbidden by Bahá'u'lláh, and homosexual relationships He looks upon as such, besides being against nature.

Why is it that it is against nature? Presumably God could have created us differently, right? Why did God create us in this way?

My questions presuppose that the Baha'i Faith takes a voluntarist position on morality – that something is right or wrong simply because God wills it so. This is what I believed as a Baha'i, based on many passages where Baha'u'llah insists on the divine prerogative. For example

> Were He to pronounce water to be wine or heaven to be earth or light to be fire, He speaketh the truth and no doubt would there be about it; and unto no one is given the right to question His authority or to say why or wherefore. Whosoever raiseth objections will be numbered with the froward in the Book of God, the Lord of the worlds. `Verily He shall not be asked of His doings but all others shall be asked of their doings.'

Recently I came across this article that says the Baha'i Faith doesn't necessarily teach theological voluntarism. That's news to me. If anyone can expand on that, I'd love to hear it.

In any case, as regards homosexual behavior, although Shoghi Effendi is quite adamant that it goes against human nature, I can't

find anything in the Writings that explains how. In fact, based on what I know about the Faith's teachings, I don't see why it should particularly go against our nature. The Writings teach that human beings are essentially creatures of spirit. Our bodies are not part of who we are. They are instead tools that we use for a while as we grow spiritually. Furthermore, after we die we have no gender, since the categories "male" and "female" are biological and thus pertain to our physical bodies only.

So I would think the Baha'i Faith holds that homosexuality is not intrinsically opposed to our nature. Or to use Baha'i jargon, it is a social law rather than a spiritual law. (I'm open to correction on this point, especially considering the way in which Shoghi Effendi discusses it, which I'm not sure how to fit in the larger Baha'i belief system.) In any event, the Baha'i Faith definitely teaches that homosexual behavior is wrong. Why would that be? This excerpt from the Universal House of Justice looks like it might give an answer…but then it doesn't.

> As to why Bahá'u'lláh forbade the expression of sexual love between people of the same sex, this question relates to the broader and more fundamental question of the purpose of the laws of Bahá'u'lláh and of the Bahá'í teachings on sexual morality The laws do not represent a sterile and inhumane legal code, but rather the divine prescription, a definition of how an individual must act in order to achieve true freedom and spiritual happiness in this world and the next.

The House of Justice then quotes Baha'u'llah where he says the Prophets of God are physicians, and no one should question their

prescriptions. But there is no mention as to why it was necessary for Baha'u'llah to give this particular prescription.

The only explanation I've been able to find is this one, again from the Universal House of Justice:

> Bahá'í teachings on sexual morality centre on marriage and the family as the bedrock of the whole structure of human society and are designed to protect and strengthen that divine institution. Thus Bahá'í law restricts permissible sexual intercourse to that between a man and the woman to whom he is married.

So the reason God forbade homosexual behavior is to promote social stability. I have no argument with that, as far as it goes. But that's just it – that's as far as any explanation goes (unless there's a Writing I haven't come across).

So in short, from what I've been able to learn over the years, the Baha'i Faith teaches that homosexual behavior is wrong, that God forbade it with our best interest in mind, but there is no clear explanation as to why it would be in our best interest. There seem to be two possibilities: (1) It goes against our nature. But then that begs the question as to why it is against our nature, of which there appears to be no explanation. (2) The family is the bedrock of society, so in order to promote the stability of society, marriage has to be defended. It could also be a combination of these two. Either way, what it ultimately comes down to is divine fiat – God said so, so that's how it is.

The Catholic Church also believes that God forbade homosexual

acts, but we also believe that there's a reason for the prohibition that we can know. We believe that everything God wills, he wills because of the nature of who he is, and he wills the good for us based on the nature of who we are as human beings. So by understanding what our nature is, we understand why homosexual behavior is wrong (i.e. counter to our own well-being). The fact that we humans are a body-spirit combination is fundamental to this understanding. I will go into this in greater depth in part 2.

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THE BODY AND HOMOSEXUALITY, PART 2

In the last post, I said that the physical resurrection really matters to Christians, and that treating it as a metaphor just won't fly. That's because the body, for Christians, isn't just a tool exterior to ourselves that we use for a few years while we learn spiritual truths.It's a part of our identity. The body and the spirit together make a human being.

This can all seem rather abstract and irrelevant, so I thought it'd be helpful to discuss how it matters in the context of moral behavior. I am taking the example of homosexuality (one of many examples I could have chosen) because this is a point on which, superficially, the Baha'i Faith and the Catholic Church seem to agree. But looking under the surface, we see that our two religions have very different rationales explaining our teaching.

The Bride of Christ

In Christianity, we believe that the Church is "the pillar and ground of the truth" (1 Timothy 3:15). Jesus Christ established the Church as the way in which his presence and his teachings would continue on the earth. This is important for Baha'is to understand about Christian teaching. For Catholics (and for most Christians in general) we're not just floating around with no guidance except for the text of the Bible, whose meaning no one can agree on. We have the Church – the bride of Christ, the mystical Body of Christ, the

community of believers, Christ's instrument for the salvation of all. Baha'is believe that God made a covenant with mankind, that he would never abandon them. Christians believe this too – and we believe God fulfilled his promise when Christ instituted the Church.

I'd like to focus on one definition of the Church I mentioned above – the Bride of Christ. We see this imagery a lot in the Bible, in both the Old and New Testaments. For example in Hosea 2:19-20, God tells Israel

> I will betroth you to me forever;
> Yes, I will betroth you to me
> In righteousness and justice,
> In lovingkindness and mercy;
> I will betroth you to me in faithfulness,
> And you shall know the Lord.

Other passages can be found in Isaiah, Jeremiah, and the Psalms. The entire Song of Songs (also called the Song of Solomon) is a love song that has always been understood in the Jewish and Christian traditions to express the love between God and his people.

This theme continues in the New Testament. Jesus in several places in the Gospels refers to himself as the Bridegroom, and the imagery is repeated in Paul's letters and in the book of Revelation. I'd like to bring attention to one of these passages, Ephesians 5:22-33. Here is part of the passage:

> Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the

> Church and gave himself for it, that he might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the word, that he might present it to himself a glorious Church, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing, but that it should be holy and without blemish. So ought husbands to love their own wives as their own bodies; he who loves his wife loves himself.

This association of the husband-wife relationship with the God-people relationship that we see throughout the Bible is very important in Catholic teaching, and has very deep ramifications.

First, it should be noted that marriage is not simply a contractual relationship, as it is regarded in secular society (and in Islam, for that matter). Marriage for Christians (particularly those in the Orthodox/Catholic tradition, which represents the majority of the world's Christians) is a *sacramental* relationship. By *sacramental* we mean two things: it represents God's nature, and it accomplishes God's work. God, as we all know, is love. The marriage relationship is designed as a relationship of love, and thus manifests God's chief attribute.

This statement, "God is love," not unlike many statements in the Bible, has become a cliche in our culture and unfortunately it has lost most of its umph. So let me dwell on it for a moment. What does it mean to love? It means, in its highest sense, to desire the good of the loved one above all else. One who loves perfectly has no regard for himself, but will sacrifice all that he has and is for the loved one.

The primordial relationship

This brings me to the Trinity, a matter for which the Baha'i Central Figures have nothing but utter contempt. This is unfortunate, because I think their contempt blinds Baha'is from making an effort to understand it, and understand why Christians believe in it and what it means to them. In fact, part of why the Trinity matters to Christians is what it means for sex and marriage.

There are three persons in the Trinity – the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. They are the same in the sense that they are all God, but they are distinct in terms of their relationship with each other. It is the relationships among the three that I want to focus on.

The Father loves the Son. He loves him perfectly and completely, pouring out all that he is for the Son. The Son reciprocates that love, completely and utterly. He also pours out in love and self-sacrifice all that he is for the Father. The Father and the Son are eternal of course, but their eternity is not static. It involves an eternal self-giving and self-sacrifice for the other. The love that the Father and Son share for each other is so complete and profound that it results in the third person of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit can be understood to be, in himself, the love the Father and the Son share for each other.

This is a relationship that exists within God, and so has no beginning or end. This is a defining characteristic of who God is. He is not a static unity. He is a relationship of persons, who love each other so utterly that their identity cannot be separated. When we speak of the human being as created in God's image, this is part of what we mean. We humans are social animals and desire

community and love because we are the image of God, who is within himself interpersonal.

We image God in a special way in marriage, because it is within marriage that two people make a life-long commitment to each other. In a marriage, you give all of yourself to and for your spouse. You give your wealth and your time, you sacrifice bad habits, you compromise on your personal desires, because you value your spouse's well-being above your own. If the husband sacrifices all of himself for his wife, and the wife sacrifices all of herself for her husband, then they image God. The most personal and intimate way in which the husband and wife give themselves to each other is through sex.

The reason sex is so intimate and personal is that it involves our bodies. If you give someone money, for example, you're giving them something outside of yourself. Since Christians regard the body as a part of the person herself, and not something distinct from herself, we regard the things we do with our bodies as being of special significance, because our bodies are us. If you give your body to someone, you are literally giving your*self* to that person.

Sex and creation

Notice that it is in this union of bodies, i.e. union of selves, where new life begins. It is no coincidence that sex and reproduction are connected. You don't have to believe in God to see the connection; it's obvious just by looking at the natural world. We Christians happen to believe in God, and we believe God made the connection between sex and

reproduction for a reason – because it is an image of God's nature.

God could create human beings however he wanted. He could make them grow on trees, or sprout out of the ground like dandelions. He could certainly do all the creating by himself. But he doesn't. He chooses to take us as his partners in the act of creation. He invites two of his children to join him in creating a new person. This is a profound gift, and also a profound responsibility. And he delegates this power to us through the sex act. He designed sex as the way we participate in God's creative power.

One of the worst lies ever told about Catholics was that we believe sex is dirty. We don't believe that. God forbid! In fact, we believe the opposite. Sex is holy. Sex is a sacred act, and to perform it with impunity is to commit sacrilege.

There are many ways in which you can show love for someone else. The sex act is different because that is how new persons are created. That is why homosexual sex is not allowed in Catholicism – because it is a joining of bodies (joining of selves) without creation.

I mentioned above that we are created in God's image. That includes our gender. Our femaleness or maleness is in God's image. Genesis 1:27-28 says,

> So God created man in his own image;
> in the image of God he created him;
> male and female he created them.
>
> Then God blessed them, and God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply…"

We are the image of God all the time, but we are the image of God in a special way in the marital embrace, because it is there that we are the image of God *as Creator*. Our bodies are therefore just as much the image of God as our spirits are.

So for Christians, the body is an intrinsic part of the human being. To bring us back to the Resurrection, the fact that Jesus rose from the dead *in the body* is an essential part of our faith. The Resurrection is how we are brought into eternal life. God created us as a spirit-body duality, and it is through this duality – both our spirits and our bodies – that we image God. And it is in the entirety of our being as humans – both our spirits and our bodies – that we will enjoy eternal life.

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THE ELECTION OF OBAMA AND THE CAUSE OF JUSTICE

I recently came across a blog post that succinctly expresses the feelings that I've been hearing a lot in Catholic circles: Obama: A Deadly Irony

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“THE FAITH WHICH DOES NOT REJECT ANY PEOPLES’ CUSTOMS”

The Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith, the Vatican department in charge of missionary work, gave the following instructions to Catholic missionaries in 1659 on how to deal with the cultures they were to encounter in the Far East:

Put no obstacles in their way; and for no reason whatever should you persuade these people to change their rites, customs, and ways of life, unless these are obviously opposed to religion and good morals. For what is more absurd than to bring France or Spain or Italy or any other part of Europe into China? It is not these that you should bring but the faith which does not spurn or reject any peoples’ rites and customs, unless they are depraved, but on the contrary tries to keep them … Admire and praise what deserves to be respected.

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THE HOLIDAY OF EASTER

In the Christian tradition, the year is basically divided into three big chunks. There is the time associated with Christmas, the time associated with Easter, and then there's everything else. Our whole year is structured around the timing of Christmas and Easter.

Christmas and Easter each have two seasons associated with them, one leading up to it and one after it. For Christmas there's the seasons of Advent and Christmas, and for Easter there's the seasons of Lent and Easter.

As I have discussed before, Christianity has three basic ideas, what you might call its "fundamental verities". These are the incarnation, death and resurrection of Christ. The incarnation, when Christ took on a human body, is remembered at several times during the year, but especially at Christmas. The death of Christ is remembered every Friday, but in a special way on Good Friday. And the resurrection, commemorated every Sunday, is commemorated especially at Easter. That's why Christmas, Good Friday and Easter are so important for Christians.

Although the secular culture makes a bigger deal of Christmas, within Christianity Good Friday and Easter are considered holier. Easter is so holy, in fact, that it does not occur on day only, but extends for an entire week. Every day this week is considered to be Easter.

The whole Easter season lasts 50 days. The fortieth day is Ascension, when Christ rose bodily into heaven 40 days after his

resurrection. Ten days after that is Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit descended upon Mary and the Apostles.

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THE "INSUPERABLE WALL" BETWEEN HEAVEN AND EARTH

My commentary on the *Letter to the World's Religious Leaders* is drawing to a close. I'll just do one or two posts on the topic after this one. Right now I would like to make a comment on one sentence in paragraph 20:

> Together with the crumbling of barriers separating peoples, our age is witnessing the dissolution of the once insuperable wall that the past assumed would forever separate the life of Heaven from the life of Earth.

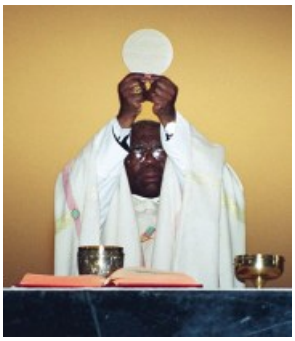
I'm confused as to what this means. Who in the past assumed there was an insuperable wall between the life of Heaven and the life of Earth? This notion is foreign to Christianity.

Perhaps a Christian could say that after the Fall of Adam, there was a wall between Heaven and Earth, presented allegorically by an angel with a flaming sword keeping people out of Eden. But that wall was destroyed by Christ. Christ's coming into the world and redeeming the world reestablished the link between Heaven and Earth that had been impaired (a more accurate term than "insuperably" blocked) by the Fall. Ever since the events of Christ's life, there has been a continuous and unbroken link between Heaven and Earth.

There are many ways in which this is manifested in the Catholic belief system. For example, we have the veneration of saints. When we pray to saints (who we believe to be in heaven), we are assuming

there is no “wall” between us and them. We are all, those who have died and those still on the earth, part of the same Church, and therefore linked through Christ to each other.

Another example of how Catholics don’t believe (and never have believed) there to be a wall separating Heaven and Earth are what are called sacramentals. These are objects used for religious purposes that have been blessed, so they have a special spiritual potency. Holy water, rosaries, and crucifixes are examples of sacramentals. We believe that when a priest blesses a sacramental, grace from God is infused into that object. Certainly we would not believe that if we thought there was a “wall” separating Heaven and Earth.



The most important way, for Catholics, in which Heaven and Earth meet is the Eucharist. When we go to Mass on Sunday (or any day of the week), what we essentially do is engage in a long, communal prayer. The culmination of this prayer is the Eucharist, when bread and wine are offered to God, and God changes them into the Body and Blood of Christ. So when we consume the Eucharist, we are literally *eating* God.

There is no possibility a Catholic who believes in the teachings of the Church would imagine there is a wall separating Heaven from Earth. And these are ancient teachings and practices, long predating the inception of the Baha’i Faith.

That said, why does the Universal House of Justice say that “the past” (whoever that refers to) assumed there was an insuperable wall separating the life of Heaven from the life of Earth? Perhaps

they mean that religious life was seen as strictly separate from mundane life. But anyone with even a cursory knowledge of history prior to, say, 1750 will know that such a separation was the rare exception rather than the rule. It is only those of us unfortunate enough to live in the long shadow of the "Enlightenment" who are prone to such a fallacy.

Later in the same paragraph the Universal House of Justice says,

> As the age-old promise of a world animated by principles of justice slowly takes on the character of a realistic goal, meeting the needs of the soul and those of society will increasingly be seen as reciprocal aspects of a mature spiritual life.

What are the needs of society, as distinct from the needs of the soul? I don't even know how to respond to this, because I'm not really sure what the UHJ is talking about. Are they saying religious leaders of the past took no concern for social problems like poverty or social, political or legal injustice? That would be patently absurd. I can't bring myself to believe the members of the UHJ would be so obtuse as to make that claim, especially in a letter addressed to the modern successors of those religious leaders. But what did they then mean by the statement?

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“THE MYSTERY OF NEW BIRTH SHONE UPON US”

The following is from a letter written by St. Leo the Great, who was bishop of Rome from 440 to 461:

To speak of our Lord, the son of the blessed Virgin Mary, as true and perfect man is of no value to us if we do not believe that he is descended from the line of ancestors set out in the Gospel. Matthew’s gospel begins by setting out “the genealogy of Jesus Christ, son of David, son of Abraham,” and then traces his human descent by bringing his ancestral line down to his mother’s husband, Joseph. On the other hand, Luke traces his parentage backward step by step to the actual father of mankind, to show that both the first and the last Adam share the same nature.

No doubt the Son of God in his omnipotence could have taught and sanctified men by appearing to them in a semblance of human form as he did to the patriarchs and prophets, when for instance he engaged in a wrestling contest or entered into conversation with them, or when he accepted their hospitality and even ate the food

they set before him. But these appearances were only types, signs that mysteriously foretold the coming of one who would take a true human nature from the stock of the patriarchs who had gone before him.

No mere figure, then, fulfilled the mystery of our reconciliation with God, ordained from all eternity. The Holy Spirit had not yet come upon the Virgin nor had the power of the Most High overshadowed her, so that within her spotless womb Wisdom might build itself a house and the Word become flesh. The divine nature and the nature of a servant were to be united in one person so that the Creator of time might be born in time, and he through whom all things were made might be brought forth in their midst.

For unless the new man, by being made "in the likeness of sinful humanity," had taken on himself the nature of our first parents, unless he had stooped to be one in substance with his mother while sharing the Father's substance and, being alone free from sin, united our nature to his, the whole human race would still be held captive under the dominion of Satan.

The Conqueror's victory would have profited us nothing if the battle had been fought outside our human condition. But through this wonderful blending the mystery of new birth shone upon us, so that through the same Spirit by whom Christ was conceived and brought forth we too might be born again in a spiritual birth; and in consequence the evangelist declares the faithful to "have been born not of blood, nor of the desire of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God."

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THE MYTH OF INTERRELIGIOUS HOSTILITY

It is often imagined that the followers of the world's religions dislike each other merely because of their religious affiliation, and that religions encourage people to fight and kill those who don't agree with them. That's a bunch of crap.

It is true that religious people have killed other religious people. It's also true that atheists have killed religious people, and that atheists have killed other atheists. The common denominator here is not religion, but human beings. It's in our nature as humans to hate and kill. Religion doesn't make people do that.

If you're a history buff or foreign affairs junkie, you may have heard of the "clash of civilizations" thesis. This holds that the world is divided into "civilizations", each of which is at odds with the other. The two "civilizations" that receive the most attention in this thesis are Western Christianity and the Islamic world. Supposedly, the Christians and Muslims have for centuries been divided into two warring blocs.

While there is an element of truth to that, the way history is presented here is misleading. While Christians sometimes fought Muslims, they also made alliances with Muslims against common enemies. This was quite common in places and times that are stereotyped as Muslim-Christian battlefields, like medieval Spain and the Crusader states.

Neither the Christians nor the Muslims fought simply on the basis

of religious affiliation. There were always other factors at work that complicated the issue. For example, when the Ottoman empire was expanding into Europe in the 1400s and 1500s, the motivation for their conquests wasn't to conquer them because they were Christian. It was to expand their power and wealth. At the same time the Ottomans were attacking Christian Hungary and Austria, they were also attacking Muslim Egypt and Iran.

Likewise, when the Christians fought the Ottomans, it wasn't because they were Muslim, it was because they were attacking Europe. And the Christians in Europe made alliances with the Muslims in Iran against the Ottomans.

The perception that religions cause wars and make people hate each other is a religious dogma that atheists take on faith in order to justify their atheism. Unfortunately, Baha'is have also adopted this myth and take it on faith.

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THE NEW AND IMPROVED BAHA'I CALENDAR

I just want to say, I really like the new Badi calendar the Universal House of Justice implemented seven years ago.

Seat of the Universal House of Justice. Photo by Adib Roy on Flickr. CC BY-NC-ND 2.0

This calendar change is old news to Baha'is. But as I said in my last post, I haven't been paying attention to events in the Baha'i world. So it wasn't until the past few days that I became aware of it. In 2014 the Universal House of Justice announced that beginning in early 2015, the Baha'i calendar would be keyed to the timing of the vernal equinox at Tehran.

When I was a Baha'i (late '90s, early '00s), the Baha'i calendar in Western countries was simply a rebranded version of the Christian Gregorian calendar. Naw-Ruz always happened on March 21. The Births of the Bab and Baha'u'llah were on October 20 and November 12, respectively, ignoring the fact that they occurred next to each other on the Islamic calendar. The beginning of every Baha'i month and the date of every Baha'i holiday was fixed on a particular day of the Gregorian calendar. It didn't feel like the calendar of an authentically new dispensation.

I became a Baha'i at university, and I remember writing both the Gregorian and Baha'i dates when I took notes in class. After a while it felt kind of cheap though, because there was always a simple 1:1 relationship between the two. October 6, for example, was always going to be Mashiyyat 10 and nothing else.

This bothered me at the time. I knew that Naw-Ruz was supposed to occur on the Spring Equinox, which didn't always fall on March 21. One time I called the offices of the NSA to ask about it. The lady I talked to didn't seem to know what I was talking about. "It's just always on March 21," she said.

The UHJ came up with a great solution to how to handle the birthdays of the Bab and Baha'u'llah. They need to be calculated lunarly (if that's a word), so that they stay next to each other. But simply using the Islamic dates of Muharram 1 and 2 would have two problems, as I see it: (1) It would rely on the calendar of a preceding dispensation, i.e. everything would be Badi and solar, except for this one little thing, the calculation of these two adjoined holidays, which would be Hijri, and (2) It would cause the two birthdays to cycle around through all the seasons every 30-some years.

Instead, the UHJ said that the birthdays would occur after the eighth new moon after Naw-Ruz. That keeps them together, at about the point in the lunar cycle when they were actually born, while also keeping the birthdays in the autumn, when they were actually born. The range of possible dates encompasses both of the old holiday dates, October 20 and November 12. Well done, UHJ. Very cool.

Now the Baha’is finally have a real calendar.

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THE PHYSICAL VS. THE SPIRITUAL

On the previous thread, under The "spiritual" meaning of bread, Lukas wrote:

> Which brings me to a point that seems to be coming up over and over – the relative value of the physical versus the spiritual. Here's one final attempt to clarify my understanding.
>
> It boils down to this: our physical reality (body) is temporary; our spiritual reality (soul) is eternal. So while I deny that physical reality is worthless, nevertheless I assert that its value is limited and derives directly in proportion to its relationship to spiritual reality. Without this relationship, it would in fact be useless to humanity. Also, purely logically, what is the value of that which is limited compared to that which is infinite?

Generally speaking, I agree. Spiritual things are better than physical things. But (and this is a very important but) such a statement is extremely vague. Spiritual and physical *what*? In what context?

Which is better, a spiritual car or a physical car? Spiritual health or physical health? A spiritual strawberry or a physical strawberry? I disagree with the notion that in every respect, an object with the word "spiritual" in front of it is to be preferred over an object with the word "physical" in front of it.

Imagine missing work one day, and then when your boss asks you about it, you say, "Even if I wasn't there physically, I was there

spiritually, and that's more important." You have a duty to God to do your work, and you do your work by being there physically. You also need to be there spiritually, but you can't be there spiritually if you're not also there physically. So in this context, the spiritual is in a way dependent on the physical.

If you are trying to demonstrate that something in the Bible should be taken figuratively, it is not enough merely to explain that in a general way spiritualness is superior to physicalness.

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THE PURPOSE OF RELIGION?

This is the second in a multi-part series on the UHJ's Letter to the World's Religious Leaders.

The second paragraph opens with

> Tragically, organized religion, whose very reason for being entails service to the cause of brotherhood and peace, behaves all too frequently as one of the most formidable obstacles in the path…

This line puzzled me for a while. I thought, "Are they saying the reason religion exists is to serve the cause of brotherhood and peace?" Fortunately, they're not. It always pays to reread.

The key word is *entails*. Religion's reason for being *entails* service to… etc. What is under the surface is this: Religion has a purpose. It isn't stated here, but in the light of other Baha'i writings, the UHJ probably has in mind the purpose of bringing humanity into communion with God. This purpose *entails* promoting brotherhood and peace.

I'll buy that. It's important to keep in mind, though, that the cause of brotherhood and peace are not themselves the reason for religion. The UHJ is not saying that, and anyone who does say that has just undermined religion altogether. Because in a desire to serve the cause of brotherhood and peace, people are tempted to empty their religion of all distinctive content. Once you've done that, people lose their motivation to make sacrifices for that religion, so then no one will make sacrifices for the sake of brotherhood and peace. People

might still work for those goals, but religion won't have anything to do with it.

If a religion lacks substance, it lacks the power to motivate people to do good.

This post is part of a series on the Letter to the World's Religious Leaders

1. A critique of "Letter to the World's Religious Leaders"
2. The purpose of religion?
3. Religious prejudice in the "Letter to the World's Religious Leaders
4. When inclusiveness is exclusive
5. Teaching Christians about Christianity
6. Resurrection pie
7. The "insuperable wall" between Heaven and Earth
8. A clash of histories
9. The true purpose of interfaith panels

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THE "SPIRITUAL" MEANING OF BREAD, PART 2

In the thread under The "spiritual" meaning of bread, Lukas has been arguing that "bread" in the scriptures means "teachings".

Lukas brought up the following verse from Deuteronomy, where Moses is speaking to the people of Israel:

> He humbled you by letting you hunger, then by feeding you with manna, with which neither you nor your ancestors were acquainted, in order to make you understand that one does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord. (Deuteronomy 8:3)

Commenting on this verse, Lukas wrote:

> how exactly is this verse NOT comparing bread to the words of God? I mean, how would letting people hunger, then feeding them manna, be an effective way of teaching them that they live not just by bread but by the words of God UNLESS manna and the words of God are (at least on one level) the same thing? That connection between manna and God's words is the critical connection to make here.

Let's be clear that I agree that we can make a connection between manna (or bread) and the words of God. I disagree about what kind of connection we can make.

When the Israelites were in the desert, God did several wonderful things for them. For example, Moses struck a rock and water gushed

out, and God caused manna and quails to appear in the camp for the Israelites to gather. All of these should have been lessons for the Israelites that ultimately their life is in God, and obeying God brings life.

Take the instance of Moses drawing water from the rock (Exodus 17, and I think there's another incident in Numbers but I don't have time to look for it). Christians associate water with life, and therefore with Christ. Many of the references to water in the Old Testament are believed to prefigure baptism, for example, which joins us to Christ. And since the commandments of God also bring life, it would not be far-fetched to associate water with the commandments. It would be far-fetched, though, to say that when the Bible mentions water, it MEANS the commandments. Water is still water.

Likewise with bread. Bread sustains life, so naturally it is associated with Christ. For most Christians the association is very strong because in the Eucharist bread and wine literally become the body and blood of Christ. And the manna in the desert, we believe, prefigures the Eucharist.

But all of those meanings do not coexist in the same verse at the same time. In the instance of Deuteronomy 8:3, manna serves as an object lesson: you were hungry and God fed you, so it isn't just bread that sustains you, but also God's command.

If you use "bread" as a code word for "teachings", then the lesson of Deuteronomy becomes nonsensical:

> He humbled you by letting you hunger, then by feeding you

> with teachings, with which neither you nor your ancestors were acquainted, in order to make you understand that one does not live by teachings alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord.

In order for the verse to make sense, then bread cannot always mean the same thing as teachings.

Once again, Lukas is displaying the Baha'i tendency to consider teachings, and the written or oral texts that convey those teachings, as the baseline of a religion. Maybe the Baha'is are right, maybe they're wrong. My point is that there is nothing natural about this assumption. It is not, despite what several Baha'is have said here, the obvious or natural reading of the Bible.

In Christianity, the baseline of our faith is the person of Christ, not his teachings. His teachings point us toward Christ and make us like him, but always it is Christ at the center.

Observe how Lukas and I interpret the use of bread in the Bible. Lukas instinctively associates bread with God's teachings, and I instinctively associate bread with Christ's person.

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THE “SPIRITUAL” MEANING OF BREAD

The thread under Resurrection Pie has gone into a tangent interpreting a passage from Matthew, chapter 16. I’ve decided to create a new post dedicated to the topic.

Here is the passage in question:

> In coming to the other side of the sea, the disciples had forgotten to bring bread. Jesus said to them, “Look out, and beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees.” They concluded among themselves, saying, “It is because we have brought no bread.” When Jesus became aware of this he said, “You of little faith, why do you conclude among yourselves that it is because you have no bread? Do you not yet understand, and do you not remember the five loaves for the five thousand, and how many wicker baskets you took up? Or the seven loaves for the four thousand, and how many baskets you took up? How do you not comprehend that I was not speaking to you about bread? Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees.” Then they understood that he was not telling them to beware of the leaven of bread, but of the teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees. (Matthew 16:5-12)

Lukas used this passage as a way of justifying the Baha’i hermeneutic. A hermeneutic is a systematic method of interpreting scripture. The Baha’i hermeneutic is to downplay literalism and to

read metaphorical and allegorical interpretations into the Bible as much as possible. (Baha'is call this the "spiritual" meaning.) Lukas's take on the above Bible passage is an example of this approach:

> I'm trying to show that the feeding of the crowds was at least primarily, if not exclusively, a spiritual phenomenon (as opposed to a material one). To me personally, it clearly demonstrates that a miracle that seemed completely material at first reading was in fact understood by the apostles and Jesus to be primarily spiritual in nature

I disagree with Lukas. He's reading into the passage something that isn't there. As I said in the Resurrection Pie thread, when Jesus reminds his disciples about the feeding of the multitudes, what he's saying is, "Why would I care if you brought bread? I'm talking about something else." To this Lukas replied:

> I think your interpretation of the above quote from Matthew is plausible; however it still seems very clear to me that a vital part of that whole exchange is the connection that Jesus and the Apostles repeatedly make between bread/yeast and teachings. It is because Jesus reminds them of His bread that they understand that "yeast" of the pharisees means their teachings; how would this understanding have been arrived at if Jesus' bread had not in fact been understood, by Jesus and the Apostles, as His Teachings?

Who says the Apostles repeatedly make a connection between bread and teachings? I'm not aware of any examples. In this case yeast refers to the teachings of the Pharisees and Sadducees, but yeast is

not the same as bread. It's a mistake to equate yeast and bread when reading the Bible. Yeast is used as a symbol in its own right because of what yeast does. You put a little bit in, and it transforms a large batch of dough. Because of this, yeast is used to symbolize two things: the corruption of sin and the kingdom of heaven.

For example, here is one of Jesus' parables:

> He spoke to them another parable. "The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed with three measures of wheat flour until the whole batch was leavened." (Matthew 13:33)

And Paul told the Christians in Corinth:

> Your boasting is not appropriate. Do you not know that a little yeast leavens all the dough? Clear out the old yeast, so that you may become a fresh batch of dough, inasmuch as you are unleavened. For our paschal lamb, Christ, has been sacrificed. Therefore let us celebrate the feast, not with the old yeast, the yeast of malice and wickedness, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth. (1 Corinthians 5:6-8)

I am struck that Lukas assumed the words "bread" and "yeast" typically refer to teachings. I've written about this before (Shoghi Effendi and Christian authority and Further evidence that the Baha'i Faith is text-centered) . Baha'is treat teachings (and the writings that contain them) as the point of a religion, and this colors how they make sense of the Bible and Christianity. In Catholicism, the sacraments are more central than the teachings (though strictly

speaking you can't have one without the other).

In that thread under Resurrection Pie, Lukas went on to say,

> Part of the reason I personally favor this interpretation is that spiritual miracles are more important that physical ones. Would you rather have spiritual life, or physical life?

Why do you keep using the word OR? Why this OR that? Why not both? As a Christian, I don't have to choose between spiritual life OR physical life. I get both.

> A loaf of bread, or spiritual teachings that quicken you to life in the sight of God?

In Catholicism, God quickens us to life in God *by means of* bread, in the Eucharist. God does not just use ideas and words to save us. He also uses physical things. He uses both.

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THE TRUE PURPOSE OF INTERFAITH PANELS

Continuing our look at the *Letter to the World's Religious Leaders*, we come to paragraph 24. This is an interesting passage:

> We owe it to our partners in this common effort [i.e. interfaith activities], however, to state clearly our conviction that interfaith discourse, if it is to contribute meaningfully to healing the ills that afflict a desperate humanity, must now address honestly and without further evasion the implications of the over-arching truth that called the movement into being: that God is one and that, beyond all diversity of cultural expression and human interpretation, religion is likewise one.

The above passage is just one sentence. It's such a long sentence that it might be hard to see the forest for the trees. So let me break it down for you. The House of Justice here is saying, "We'll participate in interfaith activities with you, but we have to make one thing clear. The whole project is pointless unless everyone agrees with us that there is only one God and all the religions come from God. Our beliefs are the solution. If you believe differently from us, then you're not part of the solution. You're part of the problem."

Think I'm being harsh? Don't look at me. The Universal House of Justice said it.

To be honest, I don't have a problem with the UHJ saying that. They're just being straight shooters. I'm making a point of it,

though, to point out what I feel is a double standard. If a Catholic (or other Christian) says the answer to the world's problems is Christianity, at least some Baha'is will regard that as pig-headed bigotry. You don't have to take my word for it. It's the dominant theme of the *Letter*. But saying that the Baha'i Faith is the answer to the world's problems, that's enlightened open-mindedness.

By the way, all this talk of interfaith discourse reminds me of a staple of the Baha'i campus association's repertoire: the interfaith panel. Get five or six people up on a stage sitting a table together, each from a different religion. Give each one five minutes to explain their religion, and then open the floor for questions. This is supposed to promote understanding and tolerance, but I'm skeptical.

Don't get me wrong, I very much support interfaith discussions. They are very helpful. I think they have two important roles. One is that by learning about someone else's beliefs, you find out that they aren't as block-headed as your stereotype made them out to be. The other is that you learn etiquette – little things that might be offensive to a member of that faith, or at least things that are best avoided. For instance, if you have Muslim or Jewish friends, it's good to know before having them over for dinner that pork should not be on the menu.

Neither of these purposes is served by the interfaith panel discussion. Five minutes (or however long the organizer allows each speaker) is not enough time for a Catholic to explain what we believe about the Trinity, why we don't have women priests, what

we mean when we say the pope is infallible, and all the other issues people have with us. Let alone go into issues of etiquette like how to visit a Catholic church respectfully.

A theme can help by narrowing things down, but it can also hurt by watering things down. The organizer might ask the panelists to speak on "how your religion views racism" or something. Then each panelist says, "we think racism is bad". Yawn. Of course they're going to say that.

An event would have potential if there were only two speakers, along with a knowledgeable interviewer. Not a debate, but a guided discussion. Interfaith debates are dumb and pointless because they encourage adversarial judgments and attempts at one-upsmanship – not conducive to learning or understanding. Or even just an interviewer with a representative of one religion, and hold a 30-minute interview with time at the end for questions from the audience.

Anyway, getting back to our six-member interfaith panel… Aside from the superficial structure, look at its superficial composition. There are the usual suspects – the Jew from Hillel, the Muslim from the local mosque, the mainline Protestant minister, the Buddhist and/or Hindu, the Baha'i (naturally) and then something offbeat just to mix things up, like a Wiccan or a Native American, or a witch doctor from New Guinea. How can any of these people really *represent* either (a) their religion, or (b) their fellow believers? Who's representing me on that panel, for instance? The reverend from the United Church of Vanilla Protestantism? Or can we really say that the guy from Hillel represents Judaism? Is he the voice of

all Jews, from Lubavitcher to Reconstructionist?

Something else to notice: Interfaith panels are done all sorts of ways, but I'll bet every one of them that's sponsored by a Baha'i campus association will always have them talk in a particular order… the order of religions found in every Baha'i pamphlet. First the pagan, then the Buddhist/Hindu, then run through the monotheists in order from Jew onward, wrapping up with the Baha'i.

There's something interesting about this order. I think there's more going on here than simple interfaith understanding. Let's go back to the *Letter* to see what I mean.

> interfaith discourse … must now address honestly and without further evasion … that God is one and that, beyond all diversity of cultural expression and human interpretation, religion is likewise one.

The purpose of interfaith discourse then, for the Baha'is, is ultimately to show people that all religions are the same and come from God. This then, will lead people to realize that the Baha'i Faith is true. The interfaith panel, when organized by Baha'is, becomes a sort of live-action Baha'i pamphlet. Each representative gives his or her spiel – pagan, Buddhist, Jew, etc. – and then the Baha'i representative wraps it up by saying, "All religions teach the same thing. Look at tonight's panel. Everyone here said that racism is bad. That means they all came from God." And then she reads a quote from *Paris Talks* and everyone breaks for refreshments.

Baha'i campus associations, therefore, use interfaith panels as tools

for spreading the Faith. They are staged in a way that supports Baha'i truth claims. Don't believe me? Then try an experiment. Suggest to your local Baha'i campus association that the next time they hold one of these events, they not invite a Baha'i panelist. How well will that go over? Or (and this would be even more interesting) suggest they choose a topic that is not a Baha'i principle. So instead of having them talk about race unity or the equality of women and men, have the panelists talk about the value of paid clergy or the necessity of ritual.

I can tell you right now, no Baha'i campus association and no LSA will ever do that. Why not, you ask? Simple. Because the purpose of interfaith dialogue is to prove the Baha'i Faith right, not to allow the other religions to be themselves.

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“THERE CAN NEVER BE ANY REAL DISAGREEMENT BETWEEN FAITH AND REASON”

The following is from the decrees of the First Vatican Council (1869-1870), on the consistency of faith and reason:

The perpetual agreement of the Catholic Church has maintained and maintains this too: that there is a twofold order of knowledge, distinct not only as regards its source, but also as regards its object. With regard to the source, we know at the one level by natural reason, at the other level by divine faith. With regard to the object, besides those things to which natural reason can attain, there are proposed for our belief mysteries hidden in God which, unless they are divinely revealed, are incapable of being known. …

Now reason does indeed when it seeks persistently, piously and soberly, achieve by God’s gift some understanding, and that most profitable, of the mysteries, whether by analogy from what it knows naturally, or from the connection of these mysteries with one another and with the final end of humanity; but reason is never rendered capable of penetrating these mysteries in the way in which it penetrates those truths which form its proper object.

For the divine mysteries, by their very nature, so far surpass the created understanding that, even when a revelation has been given and accepted by faith, they remain covered by the veil of that same faith and wrapped, as it were, in a certain obscurity, as long as in this mortal life we are away from the Lord, for we walk by faith, and

not by sight [*2 Cor. 5:6-7*].

Even though faith is above reason, there can never be any real disagreement between faith and reason, since it is the same God who reveals the mysteries and infuses faith, and who has endowed the human mind with the light of reason.

God cannot deny himself, nor can truth ever be in opposition to truth. The appearance of this kind of specious contradiction is chiefly due to the fact that either the dogmas of faith are not understood and explained in accordance with the mind of the Church, or unsound views are mistaken for the conclusions of reason. ...

Not only can faith and reason never be at odds with one another but they mutually support each other, for on the one hand right reason established the foundations of the faith and, illuminated by its light, develops the science of divine things; on the other hand, faith delivers reason from errors and protects it and furnishes it with knowledge of many kinds.

Hence, so far is the Church from hindering the development of human arts and studies, that in fact she assists and promotes them in many ways. For she is neither ignorant nor contemptuous of the advantages which derive from this source for human life, rather she acknowledges that those things flow from God, the lord of sciences, and, if they are properly used, lead to God by the help of his grace.

Nor does the Church forbid these studies to employ, each within its own area, its own proper principles and method: but while she admits this just freedom, she takes particular care that they do not

become infected with errors by conflicting with divine teaching, or, by going beyond their proper limits, intrude upon what belongs to faith and engender confusion.

For the doctrine of the faith which God has revealed is put forward not as some philosophical discovery capable of being perfected by human intelligence, but as a divine deposit committed to the spouse of Christ to be faithfully protected and infallibly promulgated.

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“THEY WHO RULE SHOULD RULE WITH EVEN-HANDED JUSTICE.”

From the encyclical Immortale Dei*, promulgated by Pope Leo XIII on 1 November 1885:*

It is not difficult to determine what would be the form and character of the State were it governed according to the principles of Christian philosophy. Man’s natural instinct moves him to live in civil society, for he cannot, if dwelling apart, provide himself with the necessary requirements of life, nor procure the means of developing his mental and moral faculties. Hence, it is divinely ordained that he should lead his life be it family, social, or civil with his fellowmen, amongst whom alone his several wants can be adequately supplied. But as no society can hold together unless someone be over all, directing all to strive earnestly for the common good, every civilized community must have a ruling authority, and this authority, no less than society itself, has its source in nature, and has, consequently, God for its Author. Hence, it follows that all public power must proceed from God: for God alone is the true and supreme Lord of the world. Everything, without exception, must be subject to Him, and must serve Him, so that whosoever holds the right to govern, holds it from one sole and single Source, namely God, the Sovereign Ruler of all. There is no power but from God.

The right to rule is not necessarily, however, bound up with any special mode of government. It may take this or that form, provided only that it be of a nature to insure the general welfare. But whatever be the nature of the government, rulers must ever bear in

mind that God is the paramount Ruler of the world, and must set Him before themselves as their exemplar and law in the administration of the State. For, in things visible, God has fashioned secondary causes in which His divine action can in some wise be discerned, leading up to the end to which the course of the world is ever tending. In like manner in civil society, God has always willed that there should be a ruling authority, and that they who are invested with it should reflect the divine power and providence in some measure over the human race.

They, therefore, who rule should rule with even-handed justice, not as masters, but rather as fathers, for the rule of God over man is most just, and is tempered always with a father's kindness. Government should moreover be administered for the well-being of the citizens, because they who govern others possess authority solely for the welfare of the State. Furthermore, the civil power must not be subservient to the advantage of any one individual, or of some few persons; inasmuch as it was established for the common good of all. But if those who are in authority rule unjustly, if they govern overbearingly or arrogantly, and if their measures prove hurtful to the people, they must remember that the Almighty will one day bring them to account, the more strictly in proportion to the sacredness of their office and pre-eminence of their dignity. The mighty shall be mightily tormented.

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“ULTIMATELY, IT IS ONLY THE TRUTH THAT CAN BRING UNITY”

From an address by Pope Benedict XVI to the bishops of Latin America, in Aparecida, Brazil, 13 May 2007:

Ultimately, it is only the truth that can bring unity, and the proof of this is love. That is why Christ, being in truth the incarnate *Logos*, “love to the end”, is not alien to any culture, nor to any person; on the contrary, the response that he seeks in the heart of cultures is what gives them their ultimate identity, uniting humanity and at the same time respecting the wealth of diversity, opening people everywhere to growth in genuine humanity, in authentic progress. The Word of God, in becoming flesh in Jesus Christ, also became history and culture.

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WANTED: BAHA'I BLOGGERS

As many Baha'i blogs as exist out there (and there are plenty) there is an egregious gap in blogging content. As far as I can tell, there seems to be no Baha'i blog that defends the Baha'i position on controversial issues.

There are certain issues that many seekers will have trouble when they learn of them. Any Baha'i with experience teaching can rattle off a litany of them. Some seekers are motivated by social justice concerns. For them, the prohibition on involvement in partisan politics can be very confusing. Some can't understand why lifestyle choices should have anything to do with spirituality. Others are attracted by the Faith's message of religious unity and inclusiveness, and then they're disturbed that non-Baha'is can't attend Nineteen Day Feast, or that the readings at feast are supposed to be only from the Baha'i Writings. Many find the Faith's emphasis on equality of women and men appealing, only to find out that women can't serve on the Universal House of Justice.

I have not found a single blog dedicated to exploring these issues directly. There are a number of very good Baha'i blogs out there. Many of them are personal blogs that happen to be written by Baha'is. Martin's Quest is by far the best example, an excellent blog. Others combine personal material with observations on current events as they bear on the Baha'i Faith. These include doberman pizza and Barnabas Quotidianus.

Another set of Baha'i blogs take on social issues from a Baha'i perspective, like Baha'i Thought and Black America and Correlating.

(I wish Correlating would post more often, though.) There are blogs aimed at seekers, like 1863 Unity Road, but these take more of a fireside approach. There's nothing wrong with that. What we also need, though, is a blog that handles doctrinal issues, and that directly engages non-Baha'is' questions and objections. The nearest thing out there is Arise. It is relatively new, and I look forward to seeing how it develops.

All these, and other blogs I haven't mentioned, are good at what they do and should keep doing it. It's good to see so many blogs aimed at a non-Baha'i audience. What seems to be lacking in them, though, is a willingness to confront controversy. It's easy to tout the Baha'i Faith's teachings on the unity of women and men, for example. It's much harder to explain why there are no women on the Universal House of Justice.

A Baha'i might be concerned that airing these issues in public could turn people off to the Faith. Better to help them fall in love with Baha'u'llah first, and then that love can sustain them as they look at these issues. But these issues are being aired anyway, especially by Baha'i dissidents and disaffected former Baha'is. If there is no Baha'i presence on the web to discuss these matters honestly and frankly and to explain the Baha'i position, then the Baha'is' position will be explained for them.

Is anyone out there up to the challenge?

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“WE IMPLORE THOSE IN WHOSE HANDS ARE PLACED THE FORTUNES OF NATIONS…

From the encyclical Ad Beatissimi Apostolorum, by Pope Benedict XV, November 1, 1914

On every side the dread phantom of war holds sway: there is scarce room for another thought in the minds of men. The combatants are the greatest and wealthiest nations of the earth; what wonder, then, if, well provided with the most awful weapons modern military science has devised, they strive to destroy one another with refinements of horror. There is no limit to the measure of ruin and of slaughter; day by day the earth is drenched with newly-shed blood, and is covered with the bodies of the wounded and of the slain. Who would imagine as we see them thus filled with hatred of one another, that they are all of one common stock, all of the same nature, all members of the same human society? Who would recognize brothers, whose Father is in Heaven? Yet, while with numberless troops the furious battle is engaged, the sad cohorts of war, sorrow and distress swoop down upon every city and every home; day by day the mighty number of widows and orphans increases, and with the interruption of communications, trade is at a standstill; agriculture is abandoned; the arts are reduced to inactivity; the wealthy are in difficulties; the poor are reduced to

abject misery; all are in distress. …

We implore those in whose hands are placed the fortunes of nations to hearken to our voice. Surely there are other ways and means whereby violated rights can be rectified. Let them be tried honestly and with good will, and let arms meanwhile be laid aside. It is impelled with love of them and of all mankind, without any personal interest whatever, that We utter these words. Let them not allow these words of a friend and of a father to be uttered in vain. …

Our Lord Jesus Christ came down from Heaven for the very purpose of restoring amongst men the Kingdom of Peace, which the envy of the devil had destroyed, and it was His will that it should rest on no other foundation than that of brotherly love. These are His own oft-repeated words: "A new commandment I give unto you: That you love one another (John 14:34) … He teaches all men, without distinction of nationality or of language, or of ideas, to pray in the words: "Our Father, who are in Heaven" (Matt. 6:9); nay, more, He tells us that our Heavenly Father in distributing the blessings of nature makes no distinction of our deserts: "Who maketh His sun to rise upon the good and bad, and raineth upon the just and the unjust" (Matt. 5:45). He bids us be brothers one to another, and calls us His brethren: "All you are brethren" (Matt. 23:8) … And finally, as He was hanging from the cross, He poured out His blood over us all, whence being as it were compacted and fitly joined together in one body, we should love one another, with a love like that which one member bears to another in the same body.

Far different from this is the behaviour of men today. Never perhaps was there more talking about the brotherhood of men than

there is today; in fact, men do not hesitate to proclaim that striving after brotherhood is one of the greatest gifts of modern civilization, ignoring the teaching of the Gospel, and setting aside the work of Christ and of His Church. But in reality never was there less brotherly activity amongst men than at the present moment. Race hatred has reached its climax; peoples are more divided by jealousies than by frontiers; within one and the same nation, within the same city there rages the burning envy of class against class; and amongst individuals it is self-love which is the supreme law over-ruling everything.

You see, Venerable Brethren, how necessary it is to strive in every possible way that the charity of Jesus Christ should once more rule supreme amongst men. That will ever be our own aim; that will be the keynote of Our Pontificate.

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WHAT'S THE BIBLE FOR?

This is the first in a series on Shoghi Effendi's comments in the *The World Order of Baha'u'llah*, pages 18-22. In this passage, Shoghi Effendi claims that the Baha'i Faith is superior to Christianity and Islam because its Writings state clearly how the community should be led after Baha'u'llah's passing, and because they include an abundance of laws and regulations.

> ...the Edifice which the Fathers of the Church reared after the passing of His First Apostle was an Edifice that rested in nowise upon the explicit directions of Christ Himself. The authority and features of their administration were wholly inferred, and indirectly derived, with more or less justification, from certain vague and fragmentary references which they found scattered amongst His utterances as recorded in the Gospel. ...
>
> Had it been possible for the Church Fathers, whose unwarranted authority was thus fiercely assailed from every side, to refute the denunciations heaped upon them by quoting specific utterances of Christ regarding the future administration of His Church, or the nature of the authority of His Successors, they would surely have been capable of quenching the flame of controversy, and preserving the unity of Christendom. ...
>
> Unlike the Dispensation of Christ, unlike the Dispensation of Muḥammad, unlike all the Dispensations of the past, the apostles of Bahá'u'lláh in every land, wherever they labor

> and toil, have before them in clear, in unequivocal and emphatic language, all the laws, the regulations, the principles, the institutions, the guidance, they require for the prosecution and consummation of their task. (WOB 20-21)

The second paragraph above begs a question that I want to come back to in a later post. For now, suffice it to note that Shoghi Effendi believes that the religious text is the basis for religious authority. This comes from an assumption intrinsic to the Baha'i belief system that revelation is a text, a set of words written down, and that a religion is ultimate based on those written words.

In Christianity, revelation does not consist ultimately in a text. In consists of a person, Jesus Christ. It's true that the Bible is the word of God, but that is only in a secondary sense, in that it points us to the primary revelation of God, and the true Word of God, who is Christ.

Incidentally, we don't customarily speak of the Bible as revealed by God. We speak of it as inspired by God. There's a subtle but important difference.

If a text is thought of as revealed (as in the Baha'i Faith), that means that it was transmitted from God to earth by means of a messenger. The text takes its final form by means of a one-way transmission.

Inspiration connotes something different. The text comes into being from an interaction between God and human. Not just a human individual who happens to be holding the pen, but also the community to which he belongs. The books of the Bible were born

from an interaction between the Holy Spirit and human agents. It's a little like sex (much of Christianity is, one way or another), where God is like a father and the human community like a mother. The text is born from both of them, and bears the characteristics of both.

Could that endanger the integrity of the message? No, because the message is always simply, "This is what the Son of God is like." And the Son of God himself is born of a communion of God and human.

As I've said before, one of the three pillars of Christianity is the Incarnation: when God became a human being. This joining of human to divine is at the heart of the Gospel. That is what brings us into eternal life. And the Bible mirrors this by also being a joining of divine and human.

The Bible is not simply a set of regulations for the governance of the Christian community. While it includes some moral teaching, its purpose is not for God to explain to us what to do. It is God showing us who he is, and pointing to his Son, who is the fullest expression of who God is.

Guidance with regard to how to handle particular situations as the ages pass, or detailed instructions as to how to structure the Christian "administrative order" – these are not relevant to the Bible. These issues are handled by a different mechanism, apostolic succession. Apostolic succession, like the Bible, involves an interaction between the Holy Spirit and human agents. It is not based on the Bible. It is based directly on the actions of Jesus Christ. Since the Bible witnesses to the actions of God in history, it witnesses to the establishment of apostolic succession, but apostolic succession was not created because of something someone read in

the Bible. More on that in the second installment.

To summarize:

Shoghi Effendi thinks the Christian logic is this: “God inspired the Bible, in which he explained apostolic succession.” Shoghi Effendi then criticizes Christians for reading into the Bible something that isn’t there.

In reality, the Christian logic is this: “God inspired the Bible. God established apostolic succession (i.e. not by means of the Bible).” So Shoghi Effendi’s criticism is irrelevant

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WHEN INCLUSIVENESS IS EXCLUSIVE

In response to the post Religious prejudice in the Letter to the World's Religious Leaders, Bill made the following comment. I hope he doesn't mind my addressing it here.

> When a person asserts that there should be moderation in all things, that statement cannot logically be termed immoderate. Likewise, an assertion that the religions are one and that God progressively revealed them cannot logically be considered an exclusivity.

I can see why this would appear to be true. At one time I would have agreed with Bill, but I no longer do. Yet I'm not sure how to explain why. I'm still struggling with how to articulate this. So will try to in this post, but please bear with me because this may not appear quite clear.

I agree that there should be moderation in all things, but moderation only makes sense when it is measured against an objective standard. For example, it is proper that we eat moderately, which means eating enough to sustain health but not more than necessary to sustain health. The objective standard is the constraints of human physiology. This is also what we mean when we speak of moderate sleep and moderate exercise.

When we consider the beliefs of others we should also be moderate. Let's use my car as an example. I just had the radiator fluid changed. Let's suppose that two people disagree as to what kind of

fluid to put in my radiator. One of them wants to put antifreeze (properly diluted) because it is what the car requires to run well, and the other wants to put 100% tap water because it's cheaper. What is the moderate course of action? Depends on my standard. If my standard is to optimize the performance of the car, then I have to say that the moderate choice is to do what the first guy says and not what the second one says.

When we evaluate other religions, we are also necessarily applying a standard of some sort. So while I agree that Baha'is are moderate (in their way) in their approach to other religions, I disagree with the standard they use by which they judge themselves moderate. Which brings me to the second part of Bill's quote:

> Likewise, an assertion that the religions are one and that God progressively revealed them cannot logically be considered an exclusivity.

At first glance, there are several exclusive statements here. (a) There is a God, (b) God reveals himself, (c) God reveals himself through religions, (d) God reveals himself progressively. These assumptions (or perhaps we should call them axioms) exclude all beliefs that contradict them. These constitute a standard by which Baha'is judge other religious beliefs and decide whether they are right or wrong.

So from a Baha'i standpoint, if an animist or Buddhist does not believe in God, he is wrong. His belief is excluded. Likewise a Deist or pantheist who doesn't believe in a personal God, or anyone who rejects organized religion as a way to relate to God. All these perspectives are wrong.

There's another point that might be a little more subtle. It is that although Baha'is believe their faith encompasses all other faiths, this is not quite the case. Consider Christianity. Baha'is believe (in all sincerity – i.e. this is *not* intended maliciously) that almost all Christians are wrong in how they understand the Gospel. The Gospel is actually what the Baha'is say it is.

From a Baha'i perspective, Baha'is are inclusive and Christians are exclusive. But again, like I said above about moderation, that depends on one's standard. The Baha'i standard is the Baha'i Faith and the Baha'i concept of progressive revelation. So naturally if you go by that standard, the Baha'is can't help but be inclusive. On the other hand, if you use Christianity as a standard, then Christians appear inclusive while Baha'is appear exclusive.

According to the Catholic Church, for example, God can work in the lives of non-Christians, and non-Christians can be saved. How is this any less inclusive than what Baha'is say? We both believe that God loves all people and desires that all should be saved (1 Timothy 2:4). We both believe that our belief system is true and all others less than true to the extent they differ from ours. So why do Baha'is believe that their religion is more inclusive?

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WHY CATHOLICS DON'T DIVORCE

A while back I had a post on the Baha'i concept of social laws vs. spiritual laws, and how that doesn't translate well – or at least it translates differently – to the Catholic worldview.

I used the example of divorce, which generated a lot of comments. I did my best to explain how Catholics conceptualize marriage and divorce, but I'm not sure if I was clear. Here is an old clip from South Park from 1998 that says what I was trying to say.

Quality time

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WHY I LIKE CONFESSION

Baha'u'llah condemned the Catholic practice of confessing one's sins to a priest:

> When the sinner findeth himself wholly detached and freed from all save God, he should beg forgiveness and pardon from Him. Confession of sins and transgressions before human beings is not permissible, as it hath never been nor will ever be conducive to divine forgiveness. Moreover such confession before people results in one's humiliation and abasement, and God—exalted be His glory—wisheth not the humiliation of His servants. Verily He is the Compassionate, the Merciful. (Tablets of Baha'u'llah, page 24)

Of course, when I was a Baha'i I believed this. You shouldn't confess your sins to a priest. That's unnecessary and embarrassing.

When I made the decision to join the Catholic Church, I had to go to confession for the first time and say every wrong thing I had ever done up to that point. And you know what? I didn't feel embarrassed or humiliated. On the contrary, it felt good to get it off my chest, and know that the slate was wiped clean. I didn't feel like I was getting away with it anymore.

When I was Baha'i, I did feel like I was getting away with it. Whenever I did something wrong, I said "sorry" to God alone. I said it silently, under my breath, when no one could hear me. And it was so easy to do that I never really improved my behaviour. It was easy for me to do that same thing over again, because all I had to do was

tell God “sorry”.

Knowing that I would have to bring it up at confession made it far more real to me, and spurred me to change my bad habits. If I had had this during the years I was a Baha’i, my character would have improved earlier. I regret not having had that opportunity.

So my experience has been the opposite of Baha’u’llah’s claim. What I find humiliating is the memory of my youth when I acted like a cad, and kept doing so even when I knew it was wrong and even though I kept telling God I was sorry. I feel humiliated before God that I took his mercy for granted. Baha’u’llah’s teachings made it easy for me to do that. Far from finding confession humiliating, I am grateful for it because it helps me feel accountable for my actions.

There’s no reason to be embarrassed about confession. There’s nothing someone can tell a priest that he hasn’t already heard.

Besides, if Baha’u’llah is right and confession is humiliating, then how does he explain the fact that it is taught in the New Testament?

> Therefore, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed. (James 5:16)

Christ himself directly taught it:

> [Jesus] said to them again, “Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.” And when he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit. Whose sins you forgive are forgiven them, and whose sins you retain are retained.” (John 20:21-23)

This quote from Christ directly contradicts Baha'u'llah's claim above, "...as it hath never been nor will ever be conducive to divine forgiveness". Obviously there was a time when it was conducive, or else Christ wouldn't have said so.

God gave us confession as a gift, so that we can have assurance that he forgives us. When you go to confession, after you have stated your sins the priest says, "I absolve you of your sins in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit." It is comforting to hear that with your own ears. When we pray directly to God, though we can still ask for forgiveness, we can't hear God's reply.

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